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# **SCHMITT & PETERSON ON POLITICAL THEOLOGY**

*Tim Howles*

**TEMPLE CONTINENTAL  
PHILOSOPHERS FOR OUR TIME**



# Carl Schmitt and Erik Peterson on Political Theology

**Tim Howles**

*Temple Continental*

*Philosophers for our Time, Book 1*

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# Editors' Introduction

*Philosophers for Our Time* is a new series of short books from the William Temple Foundation that aims to meet two connected needs.

First, within academic theology there is a growing interest in a range of Continental thinkers, prompted, not least, by the so-called 'theological turn' that has taken place in various strands of recent philosophy. And yet, these thinkers can seem to be esoteric, voluminous and sometimes even openly hostile towards religion. *Philosophers for Our Time*, therefore, aims to demystify some of these figures by providing accessible introductions to their work: synthesising their most important ideas, defining their key terms and explaining why their work is relevant to current theology.

Second, our societies and our planet are facing some unprecedented challenges at the present time: from populist politics and technology takeovers to spiritual stagnation and climate catastrophe. And, of course, we all need to address the sort of world that is to follow the coronavirus pandemic, the Me Too movement and the Black Lives Matter campaigns. The philosophers that we consider in this series all have something prescient or profound to say about one or more of these contemporary challenges. As such, each book focusses on an individual thinker and an individual topic in order to offer a focussed account, not just of the philosopher themselves, and what they might mean for theology, but also of what they can contribute to one of the key issues of our generation.

It is our hope that these new resources will encourage you to read some of these philosophers for yourself, as well as setting forth new thinking on some of the most urgent topics of our time.

**Tim Howles**, Series Editor

**Tim Middleton**, Assistant Editor

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# Introduction

Today, the question of political theology unexpectedly stands near the centre of theoretical discussion in the humanities and social sciences.<sup>1</sup>

As many commentators have pointed out, political theology has become a topic of interest for various academic disciplines in recent years, ranging from sociology to economics, and from anthropology to philosophy. And nowhere is this more apparent than in Continental thought. A quick glance at the indexes of works from such diverse (and apparently unconnected) thinkers as Alain Badiou, Peter Sloterdijk, Giorgio Agamben and Bruno Latour shows the occurrence, even the prevalence, of the term in their writing. For these, and for many others, political theology has provided a lens through which all sorts of contemporary situations can be brought into focus and analysed, ranging from abstract phenomena such as globalisation and secularisation, to more concrete events such as Brexit, the election of President Trump and even the response of different countries to the spread of coronavirus.

At first glance, the sudden appearance of political theology within Continental thought might seem somewhat anomalous. After all, as the name implies, the field of political theology refers to points of overlap or analogy between politics and religion. The very idea that contemporary political life might be amenable to analysis in terms of theological categories seems to be at variance with the avowedly secular worldviews of many of the thinkers noted above.

And yet, the methodological and theoretical resources provided by political theology have yielded a rich, variegated body of work within Continental thought. This has itself been taken up and developed in various ways by other disciplines, including within theology itself. In this way, political theology has served as a sort of locus

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Heron, 2017, *Liturgical Power: Between Economic and Political Theory*, p.1.

for discussion between different disciplinary fields, facilitating a productive cross-fertilization of ideas and opening up new horizons for analysis of diverse situations and events in our world today. But when and where did all this begin?

That is where this short book enters the stage. My proposal is that, if we want to understand the importance of political theology today, we might start with a debate that took place in Germany during the middle decades of the twentieth century. The story of this debate, its origin and development, is certainly curious. The two protagonists were friends and colleagues (at least at first). They wrote as professing Catholics, whilst at the same time experiencing idiosyncratic journeys *into* and *out of* institutional Catholicism itself. And although they engaged with each other's work with a kind of forensic, even neurotic, attention to detail, the debate itself was highly stylised and indirect, to such an extent that at certain points it is hard to discern whether they were in dialogue with each other at all.

And yet, for all that, it is no exaggeration to say that the terms of this debate continue to frame and prompt discussion about political theology today. As such, it provides a useful place at which to begin our *Temple Continental* series, whose purpose, after all, is to consider how Continental thought has contributed, and continues to contribute, to contemporary theological discourse.

In what follows, I will first provide some context for the debate, introducing the protagonists and the relationship they shared with each other (see [Chapter 1](#)). Next, I will describe and examine the different understandings of political theology that were enunciated in this course of their debate (see [Chapter 2](#)). Finally, I will show how this debate set the tone for various interesting developments in Continental thought, many of which are directly relevant to theology today (see [Chapter 3](#)). The booklet will conclude with some questions for further consideration (see [Chapter 4](#)), and resources for further study (see [Glossary](#) and [Bibliography](#)).

# Chapter 1

## Framing the debate

So, who were the protagonists of this debate? And what do we need to understand about their lives and contexts to make sense of the ideas they were proposing? The first protagonist was the German legal, constitutional and political theorist Carl Schmitt (1888-1985). Schmitt was a prolific writer over many decades. Hence, a huge critical literature has arisen. But some useful introductions to his thought are available, as well as a fascinating biography of his life that has recently been translated into English (for more guidance, see [Bibliography](#), Schmitt: *Where to Start?*).

Schmitt's early career as an academic lawyer fell in the final years of the German Empire. But he wrote his most influential works as a professor of constitutional law in Bonn and later in Berlin during the Weimar-period: these include a text that will be crucial for us to consider, *Political Theology* (1922), but also *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (1923), *The Concept of the Political* (1927, re-issued 1933) and *Constitutional Theory* (1928) (see [Bibliography](#), Schmitt: *Relevant Works*). Schmitt's thought at this time reflects and responds to the political and constitutional turmoil of the mid to late Weimar Republic, asking probing questions about the breakdown of parliamentary government and the function of political authority in times of crisis. It is not hard to see how these challenges reflect those we ourselves are facing right now, when questions about the nature and extent of political authority, and the best way to represent diverse and often competing interests within a given society, are forcibly presenting themselves once again, not least through the relentless prism of the coronavirus pandemic.

Though Schmitt had not been a supporter of National Socialism before Hitler came

to power, he sided with the Nazis after 1933. He quickly obtained an influential position in the legal profession and came to be perceived as the “crown jurist” of Nazism. He devoted himself, with undue enthusiasm, to such tasks as the defence of Hitler’s extra-judicial killings of political opponents and the purging of Jewish influence within German jurisprudence. But Schmitt was ousted from his academic position in 1936, after infighting with academic competitors who viewed him as a turncoat who had embraced National Socialism only as a means of advancing his career. There is considerable debate about the causes of Schmitt’s willingness to align himself with the Nazis; for some, this association taints his intellectual project entirely, whereas for others, it must be considered as a terrible political misadventure that is incidental to the main current of his thought (see [Bibliography](#), Schmitt: *Digging Deeper*).

Due to his support for and involvement with the Nazi regime, Schmitt was briefly detained and interrogated at the end of the war as a potential defendant in the Nuremberg trials. The obstinately unrepentant Schmitt was not allowed to return to an academic job after 1945. But he nevertheless remained an important figure in West Germany’s conservative intellectual scene and enjoyed a sort of clandestine influence on philosophers and political theorists as varied as Jürgen Habermas, Giorgio Agamben, Chantal Mouffe, Jacques Derrida and Slavoj Žižek among others. Schmitt died in 1985.

A brief word about Schmitt’s own religious identity is worth making here too. Schmitt was born and raised in a Catholic family, and during his years in Bonn moved in Catholic intellectual circles. As we will see, Schmitt was very interested in the role of the Church as a potential bulwark to the forces of modernity, capitalism and globalisation, and at one point in the mid 1920s even looked set to become an explicitly Catholic writer. However, quarrels over the possibility of an annulment for his first marriage (in 1916 Schmitt had married a Serbian woman of dubious character who had pretended to be a countess!) led to his eventual excommunication from the Catholic Church and in some ways his thought took a new turn from this point on. As is often the case with Schmitt, the strange events of his life can be traced in the twists-and-turns of his thought.

The second protagonist of the debate was the German theologian and church historian Erik Peterson (1890-1965). Peterson came to Christian faith through the evangelical Pietist revival movement that flourished in pre-First World War German universities. He pursued academic work in patristic theology, history of religions and

early church archaeology at the University of Göttingen, culminating in a study of early Christian monotheism (see [Bibliography](#), Peterson: *Digging Deeper*). During this time, he also developed a friendship with the theologian Karl Barth.

But in 1924 Peterson moved to Bonn to take up a post as Professor of Church History and New Testament. It was here that he met Schmitt, who was Professor of Law at Bonn until 1928. One a Protestant, the other a Catholic, the two nevertheless struck up a lively intellectual friendship that resulted in what Peterson's biographer describes as "a permeable intellectual membrane" between them.<sup>1</sup> Peterson referred to Schmitt as "the only reasonable man in Bonn" and even served as a witness to Schmitt's second marriage in 1926.<sup>2</sup>

However, Peterson was undertaking a personal trajectory of his own during the 1920s. After years of agonised hesitation, he converted to Roman Catholicism in 1930, abruptly derailing his academic career in Germany. The reasons for Peterson's journey to Rome are complex, but there is no doubt he was attracted by the Catholic magisterium's foundation in dogma and tradition, which he contrasted favourably with (what he saw as) a lack of concreteness and certainty characteristic of Protestant thought of his time, especially as exemplified in Barth's dialectical theology. Peterson moved to Rome in 1933, married an Italian woman, had five children, and in the remaining years of his life pursued a lectureship, followed by a professorship, at the Papal Institute for Christian Archaeology. This later part of his life seems to have been largely characterised by a feeling of frustration, both with an academic position that he did not feel was appropriate to his stature, and with a lay vocation that he felt was under-appreciated in the Catholic church at that time. Peterson died in Rome in 1960.

So there is a small window of time, the years spent in Bonn between 1924 and 1928, in which Schmitt and Peterson were directly in contact with one another. They mixed in similar groups. A number of letters were exchanged between them during and just after this period, although it is unclear how many and for how long this correspondence continued. And that is virtually all the biographical material with which we have to work.

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Nichtweiß, 2009, *Erik Peterson*, p.279.

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Peterson to Karl Barth, 30 November 1924, cited in Nichtweiß, p.727.

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So, what can we say about the debate that took place between them? For all the vagaries and unknowns, it is nevertheless possible to trace a ‘beginning’, a ‘middle’ and an ‘end’. We might say that their debate began in 1923 with the publication of Schmitt’s *Political Theology*. A response to that book was offered, albeit indirectly, in a treatise published by Peterson in 1935. And finally, Schmitt responded to Peterson again in a book published in 1970 entitled *Political Theology II*.

Let’s use this ‘beginning’, ‘middle’ and ‘end’ structure to examine the terms at issue in the debate between Schmitt and Peterson, and its relevance to us today.

## Chapter 2

### How did the debate proceed?

In 1922, Carl Schmitt published *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. With this, he fired the starting pistol on debates about political theology that were taken up by various later thinkers, including Peterson.

In the book, Schmitt describes a system of cultural, social and legal normativity that he claims is pervasive throughout modern life and that determines the political systems in which we live. That is to say, in the context of a liberal, western democracy, particular acts of state must apply (and be seen to apply) general “norms”, in such a way that people understand themselves to be subject to the determinate and predictable demands of the law, and not to the potentially arbitrary authority of persons.

On the surface of things, this seems intuitively to make sense. After all, every political entity (for example, a nation-state) needs to find a fair and balanced way of representing the internal plurality of its own civil society. And especially when this internal plurality contains within itself different and competing conceptions of the values that determine a good life. What better way of managing this complexity than by requiring subscription to a set of shared “norms”? When consent for this system is in place, disputes within civil society can be settled by a principle that has been agreed by all (even if agreement has only been given implicitly or by default).

And yet, this system of “norms” is precisely what Schmitt calls into question in his book.

He agrees that debates about competing conceptions of the good life are essential; indeed, they are the essence of healthy political life. But he does not believe these can

be curated within the system of general “norms” described above. This is because debates about values are constantly referred upwards to some abstract principle that supposedly encapsulates them. For Schmitt, this is reductive; it does not take account of the real situation “on the ground”. Rather than being a neutral arbitrator or facilitator, then, general “norms” actually function to negate the internal plurality that is the essence of robust civil society. And what ensues, he claims, is a kind of de-energised political domain, where “the realm of concrete human life”—the milieu in which citizens might actually assert, justify and elaborate what they believe to be right and true—is flattened (*Political Theology*, p.15). As a result, civil society finds itself increasingly acquiescing to a blank and anaemic form of governance that is carried out in its name, but not in service of its actual interests.

For Schmitt, this de-energised political domain was most clearly represented by the institution of parliament, which he disdained as a forum in which endless cycles of discussion and consensus-building do nothing but neutralise the capacity for real action and emergence. Those who followed the pre-Brexit debates in the UK parliament between 2016-2019 will perhaps have had a sense of what this feels like!

By contrast with a politics ordered accorded to “norms”, Schmitt is interested in (what he calls) “states of exception” (*Political Theology*, p.5). These are moments of crisis when the political leadership (the executive) is forced to act outside the system of “norms” that had previously defined its operations. These situations are extra-judicial, in the sense that they cannot be envisaged or regulated from within. And yet, for Schmitt, they are the most truly “political” moments. This is because they are by their very essence moments in which action, decision and change can finally emerge. And so, in some strange way, they rupture the inertia that had previously reigned and provide a strange passageway in which “the realm of concrete life” can once again make itself felt. Echoing the language of Kierkegaard, whom he read keenly, Schmitt writes: “in the exception, the power of real-life breaks through the crust of a mechanism that has become torpid by repetition” (*Political Theology*, p.15).

At the time of writing, societies around the world are experiencing an analogous situation in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. Norms, rights, systems and ideological settlements that had previously defined our existence, and that many of us thought were sacrosanct, have been overturned almost in the blink of an eye. We are living in a “state of exception”, even if the contours and implications of this are still being discerned right now.

It is at this point that Schmitt introduces the term “political theology”. For he daringly suggests that the Christian religion provides analogies by which we might understand moments of exception like this. Think, for example, of miracles. The theological concept of a miracle perfectly describes that idea of an agent or agency that breaks into the world, suddenly, irruptively, “from above”, in such a way as to generate a radical re-ordering of human values. As a good Catholic, Schmitt points to the example set by the Virgin Mary who, having experienced the miraculous in the event of the annunciation, was able to internalise and affirm its power by saying “yes” to the message of the angel. Mary is an example of how life can be irreversibly transformed in a single moment of strange anomaly. In fact, Schmitt suggests that this is the whole point of Christianity, its “form” (as he puts it).<sup>1</sup> It is no surprise for him, then, that liberal modernity tends to seek to marginalise Christianity, for its emphasis on a system of repeatable “norms” cannot allow the possibility of any such interruption from the outside. Miracles have to be rationalised out of the biblical witness precisely so that their emergent power cannot resurface in analogous ways in modern life! Thus, Schmitt writes:

The theology and metaphysics [of the modern nation-state] rejected not only the transgression of laws of nature through an exception brought about by direct intervention, as found in the idea of a miracle, but also the sovereign’s direct intervention in a valid legal order. (*Political Theology*, pp.36-37)

Schmitt’s political theology can be understood as a way of critiquing modernity by means of theological concepts. But it is also a call for a renewed form of politics, one that bypasses the neutralising effects that he believes have been introduced and normalised within the western liberal order. And the crucial point for Schmitt is that, if there is to be any possibility of such a renewal of politics, then the Christian worldview will have a crucial role to play.

In what way? What does Schmitt envisage here? Some critics have attempted to flesh out what he might have meant here (see [Bibliography](#), Schmitt: *Digging Deeper*). But the best we can probably say is that he was vague on the concrete details. And this probably reflects the vagaries of his own faith position.

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<sup>1</sup> Schmitt makes this argument especially in a short book called *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, first published in 1923.

And yet, the politico-theological idea itself is indisputably radical. For Schmitt envisages religion as a sort of index of the political order. Without the “form” that religion provides (and the religion he has in mind here is Catholicism of course), then civil society will inevitably experience a neutralisation of its political life. That is Schmitt’s claim. And it’s what fired up the debate on political theology in the years that followed.

Schmitt’s book was taken up in a limited way in the German intellectual culture of the 1920s. And then, in 1935, twelve years after its publication, Peterson offered a reply. With this, then, we arrive at the ‘middle’ point of our debate.

Peterson’s reply was given in a long treatise, which might be better described as a short book, entitled *Monotheism as a Political Problem* (see [Bibliography](#), Peterson: *Relevant Works*). In keeping with the indirect nature of their dialogue, Peterson held back until the very final page to mention Schmitt’s name, and then only in a footnote (*Monotheism*, p.104, fn.168). And yet, what is contained in that footnote could hardly have been clearer. Peterson acknowledges the importance of Schmitt’s earlier book: “to my knowledge”, he writes, “the concept of political theology was introduced into the literature by Carl Schmitt”. And he reveals that his own argument is intended as a direct contradiction, or even refutation, of what Schmitt had previously claimed, for (in his own words) “here we have tried to show by a concrete example the *theological impossibility* of a political theology” (*Monotheism*, p.104, fn.168, original emphasis).

It is well worth reading Peterson’s treatise, which is now available in a fine English translation (see [Bibliography](#), Peterson: *Relevant Works*). But let the reader be warned: from the very first page you will be confronted with an erudite, philological study of classical philosophy and patristic theology. At first, this may seem somewhat disorientating. You may wonder why you are being invited to engage with all this material as a way to think about political theology. But Peterson’s intentions soon become clear: he is setting up a contrast. For his central argument is that the advent of Christianity brought about a radical disruption of the relationship between politics and religion that had hitherto been assumed. As we will see, this was the basis on which Peterson would challenge Schmitt’s earlier ideas.

First of all, Peterson examines the pre-Christian, Hellenistic world. Here, he argues, a form of *monarchianism* prevailed (see [Glossary](#)). Ancient people assumed the existence of a single, cosmic, divine monarch over all things, a “principal” being (*archē*). This divine monarch was envisaged as being absolutely sovereign over the

world. But it was also envisaged as being abstracted from the immanent operations of the world. Peterson describes this as the difference between “ruling” (for which he uses the German word “*herrscht*”) and “governing” (for which he uses the German word “*regiert*”). He draws a parallel with those near neighbours of the Hellenistic world, the Persian Empire. The Persian king’s image would have been broadcast widely across the Empire as a representation of his sovereign rule. But his personal presence was invisible to the general population. As Peterson puts it, “the monarch does not appear at all, but remains concealed in the chambers of his palace; he remains hidden and unseen, like the director of a puppet theatre” (*Monotheism*, p.71). For Peterson, this was precisely the model by which the pre-Christian political theology of the ancient world operated: a divine entity that “reigned” but did not “govern”.

Why does Peterson draw attention to this? Because he claims this informed the structure of the political hierarchies of the ancient world. Since the “divine being” was abstracted from the actual functions of government and administration, space was opened up for human actors—“the procurators and prefects and presiding officers of the world”, as he puts it—to assume this authority for themselves (*Monotheism*, p.75). The right to govern was claimed by those acting “in the name of” a divine monarch who was absent. And, as Peterson saw it, this provided the warrant for the various forms of hierarchy and oppression that characterised life in the *polis*.

We must not forget that Peterson had left Germany for Rome in 1929. He was writing this treatise in the mid 1930s. It is not hard to imagine him casting his eyes back to his native land, watching from afar as the German people increasingly yielded to the despotic authority of a single ruler demanding total allegiance. For Peterson, this was an echo of the monarchical political theology of the ancient world. In fact, although the treatise contains not a single reference to contemporary events, the implication was clear enough to all who read it at the time. Peterson later wrote to a friend that it had been his intention in this book “to take a poke at the *Reichstheologie*”, that is, at any theologian who sought to align with the authoritarian ideology of National Socialism.<sup>2</sup>

But Peterson’s argument is that this ancient political theology found itself completely

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<sup>2</sup> Cited in Nichtweiß, *Erik Peterson*, p.766.

overturned by the arrival of Christianity. And, to the extent that vestiges of it have survived into the present (for example, in the absolute claim to political authority made by *der Führer*), this is in contravention of everything that Christianity has achieved and made available to human beings.

What was it about Christianity that contained this sort of subversive power? Peterson points to two doctrines that it introduced to the world. It was through these, he argued, that the monarchical political theology of the ancient world was deconstructed. Or, to put it another way, it was through these two doctrines that Christianity enacted the “closure of all political theology” (*Monotheism*, p.104, fn.168).

The first was trinitarian doctrine. Peterson claims that orthodox Christian theology (especially as expressed in the writing of Gregory of Nazianzus) began to conceive of the monarchy of God in terms of intra-trinitarian relations. The Christian God, because he is Trinity, is both “ruler” and “governor”. Or, to be put it another way, Christianity asserted that the economy of the divine being was entirely contained within God’s own being and therefore could not be claimed vicariously by anyone or anything else. This prevented the appropriation of theology in service of a worldly political agenda. As a result, Peterson announces “a fundamental break with every political theology that misuses the Christian proclamation for the justification of a political situation” (*Monotheism*, p.104).

The second reason Peterson gives for the closure of political theology relates to Christian eschatological doctrine. Beginning with scriptural texts, but later developed in the thought of Augustine, Peterson notes the Christian understanding of history as that which is held entirely in God’s hands. This had implications for how political activity was conceived. For Peterson, the calling of the Church was not primarily to regulate human society. Rather, the Church was to understand itself as being in pilgrimage away from the *polis* and towards the heavenly Jerusalem. This is the idea of *eschatological reservation*, namely, that worldly utopia could not be achieved in the here-and-now by human means but was to be understood as being entirely in the gift of God, held back to the end of time, and received only by faith (see [Glossary](#)). In this way, Peterson claimed that the Christian view of history challenged and de-legitimised the political assumptions of the pre-Christian, ancient world.

On account of these two doctrinal innovations, then, Peterson argues that in an important sense there could be no political theology at all for Christians. Insofar as they were to be involved in the domain of politics, Christians were to function only as “witnesses”, pointing beyond this world to the heavenly city, seeking to draw

inspiration from it in their worship and liturgy. Hence, Peterson's conclusion, as stated in that famous footnote, that he has "tried to show by a concrete example the theological impossibility of a political theology" (*Monotheism*, p.104, fn.168).

We don't know when Schmitt first read Peterson's 1935 treatise. But we do know that he waited until 1970 to publish his reply (by which time, Peterson had been dead for ten years). It came in the form of a sequel to his own 1922 work entitled *Political Theology II: The Myth of the Closure of any Political Theology* (see [Bibliography](#), Schmitt: *Primary Texts*). In this book, which has also recently been translated into English, Schmitt speaks of the need to "rip the arrow [fired by Peterson] from the wound" (*Political Theology II*, p.32). He contradicts Peterson's claim about the reserved nature of Christian political involvements. Instead, he re-iterates the view expressed in his previous book that the "form" of the political is closely aligned to Christianity.

To do so, Schmitt offers a point-by-point rebuttal of the claims Peterson had made in his 1935 treatise. First, he answers Peterson on the ground of trinitarian doctrine. Whereas Peterson had claimed that the harmonious relations between the three persons of the Godhead should inspire Christians to leave behind the antagonisms of political life, Schmitt reads the doctrine in exactly the opposite way. He claims that relations within the divine Trinity contain within themselves elements of straining, tension and even civil war. Schmitt calls this a *stasiology* (see [Glossary](#)). He offers a complex theological justification for this idea. But the core application is as follows: just as the divine persons within the Godhead are engaged (so he claims) in a sort of striving against one another, so (he believes) the vocation of Christian believers is to engage in difficult, competitive and even antagonistic processes through which they can define what is their highest value and defend it against those who might disagree. We might disagree with his understanding of orthodox trinitarian theology, of course. But the point is that Schmitt finds in this doctrine justification for his own understanding of political theology.

Second, Schmitt answers Peterson on the ground of eschatological doctrine. As we saw, Peterson claimed that human agency *within* history, however impressive or charismatic, must be understood as minor and provisional in comparison with the sovereignty of God *over* history. In response, Christians are called to display humility in the political realm, resisting the temptation to suppose that the flow of history could or should be meaningfully altered by their involvement. Schmitt counters this with a strong idea of his own about eschatology. He too notes the scriptural

idea, found in 2 Thessalonians 2:1–10, of the end of time being “held back” or “restrained” by a force called (in Greek) the *katechon*. But rather than generating a sense of political reservation, as Peterson had argued, Schmitt believes that this idea properly understood should be taken as prompting a sense of political dynamism. He argues that this was the interpretation of the early Christian apologists, particularly Tertullian, who identified “the power that restrains” the end of time, the *katechon*, with an earthly political power: in his case, the Roman Empire.<sup>3</sup> For Tertullian and others, God was using Rome to create a space for Christian activity. In the early Church, then, a nascent political theology can be detected. And it is precisely this political theology that Schmitt wishes to recapture in modern times. This is why, in his posthumously-published diary he writes: “I believe in the *katechon*: for me, it is the only possible way to understand Christian history and to find it meaningful”.<sup>4</sup> For Schmitt, then, the Christian doctrine of eschatology was one that should prompt *more*, not *less*, political involvement by human beings.

By contesting Peterson on these points, Schmitt was advancing his argument that the political basis of human society cannot be conceived apart from religion or, to put it more precisely, apart from the integration of certain themes provided by Christian theology. Peterson had claimed that the internal dynamic of Christianity must cause the very idea of political engagement to be reserved. Schmitt replied that he did not understand how Christianity could *not* be politically relevant and indeed how it could *not* lead to political dynamism. As he put it:

The church of Christ is not *of* this world and its history, but it is *in* this world. That means: it is localised and opens up a space; and space here means impermeability, visibility and the public sphere. (*Political Theology II*, p.65).

And so we are left with two entirely different conceptions of the relationship between religion and politics, and two very different future trajectories for political theology.

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<sup>3</sup> Tertullian, 1997, *Apologetic Works*, chapter 32, section 1, p.88.

<sup>4</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Glossarium*, p.63, entry from December 19, 1947.

## Chapter 3

# Developments in political theology since this debate

The debate between Schmitt and Peterson that took place in the early to middle part of the twentieth century has set the tone for various interesting developments in Continental thought. Many of these are directly relevant to theology itself. There is space to mention just a few of these in what follows, noting in particular how the terms of the Schmitt-Peterson debate have been taken forward in ways that the original protagonists would hardly have conceived at the time (see [Bibliography](#), *Other Reading*).

Peterson's understanding of monarchical political theology—a particular hierarchical alignment of politics and religion—has been influential in a wide range of fields. For example, it is found in the work of German-American political theorist Eric Voegelin, who argued that totalitarian regimes (such as the Nazis) were able to validate their own power by “immanentizing” certain characteristics that are properly conceived as belonging to God alone.

But Peterson's influence has also been felt more directly in theology itself. For example, the German Catholic theologian Johann Baptist Metz takes up Peterson's work in his project of a “new political theology”, which he conceives as an exercise in the critique of power.<sup>1</sup> Metz's ideas were later taken up by Protestant theologian Jürgen

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Johann Baptist Metz, 1969, *Theology of the World*.

Moltmann, who likewise sought to understand and reckon with Christianity's role in oppressive and unjust political structures.<sup>2</sup> And an echo can be heard in Catherine Keller's recent work on American "exceptionalisms" that themselves display such characteristics, most of all embodied in the current occupant of the White House.<sup>3</sup> It is easy to see how Peterson's work might lend itself to the project of a critique of power: we have already noted how his ideas about the closure of political theology were conceived in the context of his critique of the rise of Nazism in 1930s Germany.

Schmitt's more engaged definition of political theology has also been taken up in several ways within Continental thought. Much of this was mediated through the work of Jewish philosopher and sociologist of religion Jacob Taubes who, whilst showing himself aware of the dangers of Schmitt's political theology, at the same time recognised the importance of restoring the relationship between theology and politics. Taubes' strange lecture series, published under the title *The Political Theology of Paul*, would be a good place to start,<sup>4</sup> also noting the way in which his interpretation has been taken up in some of the recent work by Alain Badiou.<sup>5</sup>

In a somewhat different way, the debate between Peterson and Schmitt has provided an important springboard for the work of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. In his 2007 book, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, Agamben suggests that Peterson's interpretation of trinitarian doctrine actually conceals, or even "consciously represses" (*Kingdom and Glory*, p.7), a more fundamental Christian understanding, namely, that the nature of the relations between Father, Son and Spirit provides an analogue for political activity in the world. What kind of blueprint does Agamben envisage, then? His answer is clear: political theology has ordered the world in terms of an *oikonomia* (see [Glossary](#)):

Christian theology is immediately economy and providence, that is, an activity of self-revelation, government, and care of the world. The deity articulates itself into a trinity, but this is not a theogony or a mythology; rather, it is an *oikonomia*, that is, at the same time, the articulation and

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Jürgen Moltmann, 1988, *Theology Today: Two Contributions Towards Making Theology Present*.

<sup>3</sup> Catherine Keller, 2018, *The Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public*.

<sup>4</sup> Jacob Taubes, 2003, *The Political Theology of Paul*.

<sup>5</sup> Alain Badiou, 2003, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*.

administration of divine life, and the government of creatures. (*Kingdom and Glory*, p.47)

For Agamben, political theology ultimately orders our lives in the form of an “economy”. What Christianity initiates, then, is a trajectory that leads to modernity itself, and in particular to the various “providences” that structure our contemporary lives: bureaucratisation, capitalisation, globalisation and the ubiquity of the “invisible hand” of the market. For Agamben, these are de-politicizing forces. Can modern, western societies really conceive any alternative to the model of continued economic growth and development? Can we, as individuals within this society, envisage ourselves rising up to challenge its assumptions or halt its trajectory? We might think of the quip of Frederick Jameson: “nowadays it seems easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism”.<sup>6</sup> In this way, Agamben finds a ‘third-way’ out of the debate between Peterson and Schmitt: for him, the intertwining of politics and religion leads not to a political theology, but to an economic theology. And he claims that its effect is very much evident in the western world today.

As we have seen, both Peterson and Schmitt were concerned to understand the nature of political activity in the world. What can human beings do to bring about meaningful change? How might this be conceived as a distinctively “Christian” responsibility? And how might this relate to the complex challenges we face today as a global society? An interesting strand within Continental thought has recently sought to apply these questions to the matter of the global environmental crisis. In some of his recent work, for example, Bruno Latour notes that the scale of this crisis is threatening to overwhelm us. Human beings often feel de-animated in the presence of the huge challenges that face us. Political co-operation to mitigate the effects of climate change is proving difficult to achieve. And yet, for Latour, there are resources within political theology to address this challenge. Schmitt’s doctrine of the *katechon* reminds human beings that the end will come, but that it is “not-yet”. And because it is not-yet, the present moment takes on a new potential. Political action, in the truest sense of the word, is made possible, precisely because history is kept “open” by a sovereign power, one that invites human beings to engage in meaningful acts in the world. And this is precisely what is needed if global society is to mobilise in

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<sup>6</sup> Jamieson, ‘Future City’, p.76.

a sufficient way to address the scale and urgency of the challenge presented to us by climate change. Latour is under no illusions about the risk of using Schmitt's political theology to argue for this affirmative political agency: knowing full well where Schmitt's own political views led, Latour concedes that he is a "reactionary" and even a "toxic" thinker, and that the recommended "dosage" of his thought should be watched "as carefully as we would do with a powerful poison".<sup>7</sup> It is not even clear to what extent Latour would subscribe to institutional Catholicism. And yet, Latour is inspired by the way Schmitt is able to conceive of religion as a force that can facilitate space for a new political imaginary, allowing alternative futures for human society to be projected and unleashing a new form of political energy to bring them about. That Latour, himself one of the most widely cited and admired of contemporary Continental thinkers, can speak in such approving terms of the role of political theology shows that the times are indeed changing in this field! And it surely points to more productive exchanges to come.

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<sup>7</sup> Bruno Latour, 2013, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*, p.113.

# Chapter 4

## Questions for further consideration

As we have seen, the debate between Schmitt and Peterson framed a number of issues that are still being worked out in theology today.

Foremost among these is the vexed question of the boundaries of the relationship between politics and religion in contemporary society. In providing their own answers to this question, Schmitt and Peterson put forward radically different proposals. But the question is arguably even more vexed today than it was in their own time.

We might like to start with the matter of political apathy. In the western world, we don't need to look hard to diagnose a sense of individual and collective disenfranchisement. Arguably, this has contributed to some of the political crises of recent years, including the Brexit vote in the UK, the election of President Trump in the United States and the Extinction Rebellion protests that have taken place worldwide. But what is the cause of this disenfranchisement? To what extent does this reflect a failure of political processes? And is it possible that (as Schmitt claims) the "form" that is supplied by religious ideas and traditions might be able to recapture and reframe some of this political energy, even in our day and age? It is here that political theology as a field of enquiry might begin to play a role.

And yet, even as we think about this, we must also ask to what extent we dare inject a dose of political theology to a societal challenge that is normally framed in non-religious terms? What might be the consequences of introducing a theological line of thought to this complex debate?

Another set of questions relates to how political theology can be used as a diagnostic tool. How can it be used to analyse the (possibly) religious derivation of certain

contemporary tropes? Take, for example, the idea of the “secular”. Crucial to the identity of many contemporary western societies is the idea that commitment to secular values will provide a neutral or non-aligned space within which politics can be creatively and independently pursued on its own terms. The idea of the secular thus becomes sacrosanct. But the debate around political theology traced above begins to deconstruct this assumption. Some contemporary theologians (such as Graham Ward and John Milbank) have shown how western political society is characterised above all by “secular fundamentalisms” that cause the public space to become not pluralised, but de-politicised. In their work, and in the work of others, there is an attempt to recapture a political imaginary *through* (not *in spite of*) a religious worldview. But can this be justified? What might be the pitfalls of such an approach?

An equivalent analysis can be applied to contemporary tropes such as capitalism or globalisation. These are the ideological frameworks within which we all live our lives. We are made to believe we can do nothing to influence or change them. And yet, how does this belief in turn reflect a sort of religious metaphysics? It is as if we have “submitted” to a direction of history that is guaranteed by a quasi-providential “higher power” (whether we call this by the name of “the economy”, “science”, “technological development”, or something else). We put our “faith” in that “higher power” to provide for us. And we alter our values to live in accordance with it. But this is religious language. And theology might therefore be in a good position to critique these assumptions, and to offer something different in their stead. A recent work by Eugene McCarragher provides a good place to start in thinking about how the concept of capitalism has taken on many of these enchanted, quasi-religious characteristics, often without us even noticing it (see [Bibliography](#), *Other Reading*).<sup>1</sup>

Two additional, contemporary challenges seem to present themselves as candidates for politico-theological analysis.

The first has already been mentioned: the global environmental crisis. Here we have a situation that affects us all, whatever our religious or political context. But to what extent can we understand this crisis as originating in attitudes to the world that reflect a particular politico-theological assumption? And how might religion, with its

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene McCarragher, 2020, *The Enchantments of Mammon: How Capitalism became the Religion of Modernity*.

sensitivity to the impact of human agency in relation to history, potentially provide a motivation by which a new mode of useful political action could be envisaged? The recent papal encyclical *Laudato Si'*, with its delicate blending of religious and political insights, might be one place to start in working out the implications of this.<sup>2</sup>

The second is the coronavirus pandemic. At the time of writing, this crisis is only just beginning, and the future seems very hard to predict. But one thing can be predicted with certainty: here is something with the potential to re-orientate many of the “providences” that western societies have assumed would hold forever: the trajectory of liberal democracy, the reign of capital, the role and function of science, and so on. Whatever the politics of the future will be, it seems that political theology will have a role to play in providing context and insight to questions we will all need to address.

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<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, 2015, ‘Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'*: On Care for Our Common Home’.

# Conclusion

The field of political theology continues to develop today. But many of the questions it frames can be traced back to the strange and yet compelling interaction that took place between Peterson and Schmitt. Each offered a wholly different prescription for the relationship between politics and religion in the public sphere. And yet, whether we prefer one or the other, or some kind of synthesis between them, there is no doubt that their debate warrants attention and scrutiny today.

# Glossary

**Eschatological reservation:** For Peterson, Christianity teaches that worldly utopia cannot be achieved in the here-and-now by human means. The emphasis of the Christian faith, rather, was on the sovereignty of God to “make all things right” at the end of time. In light of this, human action can only ever be minor and provisional, even where it was well-intentioned. “Reservation” was therefore the attitude or disposition that Peterson claimed was appropriate for human beings to adopt in the political realm.

**Katechon:** this Greek word is found in 2 Thessalonians 2:1–10, where it describes a force that is said to be “restraining” or “holding back” the end of history, thus “keeping open” the present time. This reference has been interpreted in various ways in Christian history. Tertullian, for example, suggested it referred to the Roman Empire, whose political and legal order he saw as God-given insofar as it provided the conditions for the Christian mission to flourish. This alignment enabled various political theologies to be developed in the fourth and fifth centuries that sought to align the Church with a political order. The fourth-century bishop, Eusebius of Caesarea, is an example frequently cited by Schmitt, as well as various political thinkers of the post-Napoleonic restoration period, including Joseph de Maistre and Donoso Cortés. Schmitt is aware of the theological disputes around the concept of the *katechon* and uses the term to justify his own understanding of the relation between politics and religion.

**Monarchianism:** this term derives from the Greek word meaning “a single principle of authority”. In the history of the Church, it is applied to early Christian theologians who sought to defend the absolute unity of God (his “monarchy”) against ideas such as the Trinity, which it was feared would potentially lead to division in the essential being of God. But Peterson uses the term to characterise a political-theological idea that he claims was widespread, or even ubiquitous, in the ancient world. This legitimated monarchical rule on earth by reference to an understanding of the divine

being. It is this idea that he believes Christianity helped to overturn.

**Oikonomia (economy):** this term is used several times in the New Testament (see Ephesians 1:10, 3:2, 3:9, 1 Timothy 1:4). Its basic meaning refers to the “handling” or “management”, or more literally the “housekeeping”, of a thing, usually assuming or implying that this is carried out responsibly and with care. In patristic theology, the concept was applied to describe God’s actions in the world: first, his providential ordering of creation itself (the *divine economy*) and second, his providential ordering of the Church and its members (the *ecclesiastical economy*). In the debate between Peterson and Schmitt, the term is further applied to the nature of the relations between the three persons of the Trinity. In this way, analogies were drawn between the “being” of God (his internal, trinitarian relations) and the nature of political order in the world. A further inflection of this idea has recently been offered by Agamben.

**Stasiology:** Schmitt rejects the idea that representative political activity can take place under a regime of norms, since the effect of a norm is to generate inertia and compliance to a rule that has already prescribed this representation in advance. Instead, he defines politics in terms of values that are secured through difficult, competitive and even antagonistic processes. Fascinatingly, he defends this in Christian terms by pointing out that the doctrine of the Trinity may contain within itself an idea of conflict between the three Persons of the Godhead. He defines this as a “stasiology”, a term taken from twentieth-century French political theory to describe the way in which a government or political unit can remain stable in spite of or even because of internal conflict. With its Gnostic (even Manichean) echoes, this idea takes Schmitt close to the boundaries of orthodoxy. But it is part of the argument he advances for his definition of political theology in his late work.

# Bibliography

## Carl Schmitt

### Where to start

A good place to start would be the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on Schmitt, which has a primary and secondary reading list.

Schmitt's thought was inextricably linked to events in his life. So, to follow up, you might like to read an account of his life:

- Balakrishnan, Gopal, 2002, *The Enemy: An Intellectual Portrait of his Life* (London: Verso).
- Mehring, Reinhard, 2014, *Carl Schmitt: A Biography* (London: Polity).

### Relevant works

Schmitt's two key works on political theology, written at very different times in his intellectual career, are:

- Schmitt, Carl, 1922, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (trans. George Schwab, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
- Schmitt, Carl, 1970, *Political Theology II: The Myth of the Closure of any Political Theology* (trans. Michael Hoelzl & Graham Ward, Oxford: Wiley, 2008).

Another important work from the early part of Schmitt's career that fills out his understanding of politics is:

- Schmitt, Carl, 1932, *The Concept of the Political* (trans. George Schwab, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

This particular edition also contains a very interesting lecture delivered by Schmitt in 1929 entitled “The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations”, in which he explains how this understanding of politics has been compromised and reduced by forces of modernity and secularisation.

If you are ready to explore Schmitt’s work further, then you might like to dip in to a strange but fascinating book that he published after the war exploring the implications of his political-theological ideas for the new European world order:

- Schmitt, Carl, 1950, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the ‘Jus Publicum Europaeum’* (trans. G. L. Ulmen, New York, NY: Telos Press, 2003).

## Digging deeper

If you are interested in the controversy over Schmitt’s personal political history, then you might like to start with this overview article:

- Caldwell, P. C., 2005, ‘Controversies over Carl Schmitt: A Review of Recent Literature’ in *The Journal of Modern History*, 77 (2), pp.357–387.

To explore Schmitt’s ideas on political theology further, either of these edited volumes are useful:

- Arvidsson, M., Braennstroem L. & Minkinen, P., (eds.), 2016, *The Contemporary Relevance of Carl Schmitt. Law, Politics, Theology* (Abingdon: Routledge).
- Meierhenrich, Jens & Simons, Oliver, (eds.), 2017, *The Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

For an application of Schmitt’s political views to our contemporary situation, see:

- Mouffe, Chantal, (ed.), 1999, *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt* (London: Verso).

Schmitt’s ideas about political theology have been influential in a variety of directions. The key secondary text in this regard is:

- Meier, Heinrich, 2011, *The Lesson of Carl Schmitt: Four Chapters on the*

*Distinction between Political Theology and Political Philosophy* (trans. Marcus Brainard, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

## Erik Peterson

### Relevant works

A number of Peterson's works, including his academic monograph of 1926 entitled "*Heis Theos*": *Epigraphic, Form-Historical and Religious-Historical Investigations*, can only be read in German. However, we are fortunate to have a recently published critical edition of a number of his theological essays:

- Peterson, Erik, 2011, *Theological Tractates* (trans. Michael J. Hollerich, Stanford, CT: Stanford University Press, *Cultural Memory in the Present series*).

The essay under discussion here, entitled "Monotheism as a Political Problem", is contained in this volume on pp.68-105.

### Digging deeper

There is a useful introduction to Peterson's life and thought in the critical edition noted above (*Theological Tractates*). Unfortunately, at the moment there is not much else available in English: the only biographical work yet written on his life and thought is in German, and even this is quite dated now:

- Nichtweiß, Barbara, 1992, *Erik Peterson*. Neue Sicht auf Leben und Werk (Munich: Herder).

To dig deeper in Peterson's thought, you might like to consult this excellent article that provides a critique of Peterson's position in relation to Schmitt:

- Mrowczynski-Van Allen, Artur, 2017, 'Beyond Political Theology and its Liquidation: from Theopolitical Monotheism to Trinitarianism' in *Modern Theology*, 33 (4), pp.570-593.

You may also be interested to consult a forthcoming work by the author, in which Peterson's political theology is addressed in relation to recent Continental thought, particularly that of Bruno Latour:

- Howles, Timothy, 2020, *The Political Theology of Bruno Latour: Globalization, Secularization and Environmental Crisis* (forthcoming, Edinburgh University Press).

## Other Reading

The debate between Peterson and Schmitt has been taken up in interesting ways in recent Continental philosophy and theology. Here are some places to follow up if you are interested:

- Voegelin, Eric, 1952, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (2000, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press).
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- Northcott, Michael S., 2013, *The Political Theology of Climate Change* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans).
- Latour, Bruno, 2017, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climactic Regime* (Oxford: Wiley).
- Heron, Nicholas, 2017, *Liturgical Power: Between Economic and Political Theology* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press).
- Keller, Catherine, 2018, *A Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public* (Columbia, NY: Columbia University Press).
- Eugene McCarragher, 2020, *The Enchantments of Mammon: How Capitalism became the Religion of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).



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