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WHAT IS POLITICAL THEOLOGY?

Abstract

The idea of political theology, which for almost one hundred years has been accompanying our intellectual debates, seems to be an expression of the reawakening of awareness that reflection over politics, if we do not want to move exclusively on the surface of phenomena, must reach as deep as possible, and also take into account the religious and theological dimension of our life. However, there are numerous perspectives tied to the notion of political theology, and therefore this term can easily lead us astray. The main purpose of this article is to identify different positions in regard to the notion of "political theology." It is necessary, first, to consider what theology itself is and how it can be understood, then, what may be hidden behind the word "political," and finally, how these two fields of human life mutually influence each other, interpenetrate, and struggle for priority. This essay is about whether the key to understanding and shaping our reality could be a theological vision of politics, based on the vision of God who appeared in this world as Logos, or whether the key should be a political interpretation of a theology that subordinates and uses religious content to accomplish the earthly purposes of a particular political community.

Keywords: theology, politics, political theology, logos, Carl Schmitt.

INTRODUCTION

For some time now, the term "political theology" has been unusually popular and fashionable. The mysterious term sounds to some almost like a magical spell, which, once spoken, immediately gives clear insight into the depths of political reality. It must, however, be stressed that there is by no means one explicit and

singular perspective tied to the notion of political theology, and therefore this term can easily lead us astray. A more accurate representation of how the theological order is connected to and intertwined with the political order is a task worthy not only of an entire book but of a lifetime of work. All I can present here are my own reflections, that is, the reflections of someone who is neither a theologian nor a politician, but who recognizes the crucial significance of both of these dimensions (theology and politics) in our lives and tries to look at them from a philosophical perspective.

After some preliminary remarks, I would like to consider what theology is and how it can be understood, in order to proceed next to political theology and issues associated with it.

As is well known, a German lawyer, Carl Schmitt, played an important role in the propagation of the latter notion, thanks to his book *Political Theology*, published almost a hundred years ago, in 1922. The idea of combining the political perspective with theology was not, of course, Schmitt's discovery. He himself was well acquainted with Mikhail Bakunin's book *Political Theology of Mazzini and the International* (1871). It is also worth mentioning here the publication, two centuries earlier, in 1670, of Baruch Spinoza's *Theological Political Treatise*. But the debate as to the original author of the term is, at this moment, quite irrelevant. What is significant, however, is the assumption directly tied to the use of the term. The idea of political theology—irrespective of what ultimately hides behind the term—is the conviction that when reflecting on politics, in order not to remain exclusively on the surface of the phenomena, it is necessary to reach as deep as possible, and therefore to take into consideration the theological, religious, and metaphysical perspective.

It might be noticed that such an idea is no great discovery. For people for whom the religious dimension of human life is significant, such a theory sounds rather obvious, not to say banal. But, this is not—and was not—always obvious to everyone. When Schmitt wrote his book, the dominant understanding of political reality looked somewhat different. Schmitt's work was a deliberate polemic and provocation, containing, for example, the famous sentence with which he starts the third chapter of his *Political Theology*, "All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts."[1] The work was directed at the then-existing mainstream

[1] Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology, Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, George Schwab (trans.), University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2005, p. 36.

of intellectual specialists on the state and law, for whom politics had become an exclusively technical issue—the art of the institutional organization of human life and the effective management of material resources. Schmitt challenged those who perceived the world of politics according to the modern paradigm, where the central point around which everything else circles, and from which it results, is the human being—understood as the autonomous individual.

I.

Let us leave Schmitt to the side—we will come back to him yet—and move on to our main topic: what does the term "political theology" mean? Let us start from "theology," which deserves special attention. Speaking about theology, here and now, Christianity naturally comes to mind and the theology that has been developed within its realm. I would like, however, to leave this aside for a moment and look at the matter at hand from a wider perspective. Theology—in the simplest and broadest sense—is the study of God. It attempts to include and organize all our knowledge about what, or rather who, God is. But from where can we claim to have any knowledge of divine matters? Well, this knowledge can come from two different sources.

First of all, what we know about God we have learned and received from others—this is knowledge that is passed on in the form of the specific religious tradition of the given community in which we have been raised and in which we participate. The religious stories, myths, rituals, and symbols that we receive, and which we breathe from birth, determine how we imagine the divine and absolute. Among the many religious traditions, we can distinguish those that refer directly to divine revelation—these are religions where God's Words are written down in holy books or sacred scriptures. According to the message passed on by these religions, God reveals himself to man by speaking to him. He tells people who He is, while also communicating His expectations of how humans should live, and what He is opposed to. This applies to all human activities, including those related to the organization of political life. People who are rooted in a particular religious tradition know in principle——even if the knowledge is neither clear nor ordered—how they should behave and how their political community should be shaped.

On the basis of this vague sense of God, practiced from within a specific religious tradition, one can, step by step, develop a more systematized form of theology, as well as understand the resulting consequences for humans and their communities.

Second, we can get to know and describe God and divine matters in yet another way, that is, as we were taught by the Ancient Greeks, who replaced religious tales and myths with philosophy. Starting with the question of the *arche*—that is, the first cause, source, or principle that rules the world—we are dealing with a series of attempts by human reason to penetrate the very core of reality. That which we call the first philosophy— metaphysics, could just as well be rightly called natural theology—reaching out to that which in its essence is God, but not by the means of a message given and embedded in culture, for example, through the Holy Books, but directly, with the help of the natural light of reason. Such an approach may, however, as it often does, signify a distance and critical attitude toward the first attempt, toward specific forms and the religious content present in a community.

The ancient philosophers, especially Socrates and Plato, are an example and proof of the fact that natural theology is possible. Four centuries before Christ they were able to contest the entirety of the Greek beliefs of the time and, with the power of natural reason, to reveal an image of God which is unusually close to the one we know through Christian revelation.

It was Plato who was the first to present, consciously and consequently, the idea of political theology, or should we say, natural political theology, not based on revelation, but on rational insight into the metaphysical basis of reality. As we read in Plato's *Laws* (Book XII), the first thing leading to faith in God is "the order of the motion of the stars, and of all things under the dominion of the mind which ordered the universe."[2] Nonetheless, the God who rules the world is not only the cause of harmony in the cosmos, but also the Greatest Good. Furthermore, this Greatest Good has distinct personal characteristics: His careful concern for people demonstrates and confirms that He is, as Plato says, "an intelligent will accomplishing good."[3] People are supposed to imitate God in their actions as we read in Book IV, "Now God ought to be to us

[2] Plato, *Laws*, Benjamin Jowett (trans.), England: Pantianos Classics, 1871, 966e.

[3] Ibidem, 967a

the measure of all things, and not man, (…). And he who would be dear to God must, as far as is possible, be like Him and such as He is."[4] In Plato's view, this first of all applies to those who will be responsible for creating and maintaining harmony within a political community—this is precisely what Plato describes in his *Republic*, his vision of the perfect political community ruled by philosopher--guardians. However, he who has no real knowledge of God should by no means deal with politics or lead the state. As Plato says, "we refuse to admit as guardians any who do not labour to obtain every possible evidence that there is respecting the Gods; our city is forbidden and not allowed to choose as a guardian of the law, or to place in the select order of virtue, him who is not an inspired man, and has not laboured at these things."[5] It would be difficult indeed to find a more beautiful declaration in the spirit of correctly understood political theology! Natural political theology, I should add.

However, theology owes even more to the Ancient Greek philosophers, namely, that it exists at all. I speak here of the concept of *logos*—that is, "word," "reason"—a notion used for the first time by Heraclitus. The notion of *logos* is the key to rational reflection on reality, allowing us to go beyond the vague and undefined premonition of divine matters, on to theology, understood in the strict sense, as a rational study of God—as a systematic work of human reason, which has adopted the revelation as its starting point, and is trying to understand it, that is, to reveal all that is rational in it. Theology, the study of divine mysteries with the help of reason, is possible because *logos* pervades everything. It is the link that connects man and God, the common factor.

During his lecture in Regensburg (2006), Pope Benedict XVI noted that the meeting of Greek philosophy and divine revelation as received by the people of Israel (the physical expression of which is the *Septuagint*—the translation of the Old Testament into Greek) was an exceptional sign of Providence. He described it as "a distinct and important step in the history of revelation, one which brought about this encounter in a way that was decisive for the birth and spread of Christianity."[6] In this way, the final revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ—the incarnate Word—the *Logos*—took its place in

[4] Ibidem, 716c.

[5] Ibidem, 966c-d.

[6] Benedict XVI, *Faith, Reason and the University Memories and Reflections* (http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg.html, 2006).

the world, where thanks to the reflections of the Greek philosophers, *Logos* was already known, having prepared the people for His arrival. The real perspective of theo-logy, the real rational study of God, was made possible in full thanks, of course, to the appearance of Jesus Christ among us, but thinkers and philosophers also had—and still have—their part in this process, as it is they who by the natural light of reason—which is also a form of the divine revelation of *Logos*——developed the tools for rational theological reflection.

What does this mean to us? Above all, it means that every human being has two ways of accessing that which is divine. We are dealing, so to speak, with a double revelation: the external one, which we have received from our community, our tradition and culture, and the internal one—given to us directly from the natural light of reason, from the "inner teacher," as Saint Augustine put it, which enlightens our minds' searches. Admittedly, this gives rise to a constant tension between faith and reason, but the double revelation that we participate in does not have to result in conflict, but instead, in the possibility of a reciprocal amendment of data coming from both sources. It is precisely through continuous mutual rectification that theology can and should be correctly practiced—the rational study of God, which links and confronts the truths of faith with philosophical reasoning. It is because of this that in medieval times, philosophy was referred to as the handmaid of theology——*philosophia ancilla theologiae*.

However, where God is refused a rational aspect, or where it is marginalized, theology loses its sense. Tertullian's "*credo, quia absurdum*" ("I believe, because it is absurd") or Duns Scotus' voluntarist concept, which made God's will His primary attribute, are examples from within Christianity of a split between man and God. God, in His essence, becomes unrecognizable. An extreme example of this, is, of course, Islam, according to which, God is entirely transcendent, although He speaks to man through an angel, does not speak to his reason, but gives commands, instructions, gives laws, which must be unconditionally and submissively obeyed. Islam calls for obedience, not dialogue – not the dia-logos of God with man. In this sense, there is no place for theology in Islam, as there is no place for the invitation of man by God to immerse into the depths of God and to explore His essence with the help of their reason. Theology, in the strict sense, is only possible if one and the same *Logos* is the basis of both faith and reason.

This is precisely the direction that Catholic thought had taken in Saint Anselm of Canterbury's maxims "*credo ut intelligam*" ("I believe so that I may understand") and "*intellectus quaerens fidem et fides quarens intellectum*" ("reason seeking faith and faith seeking understanding"). Contemporarily, we can find the same thought in a beautiful, somewhat Platonic, metaphor that opens John Paul II's encyclical *Fides et ratio* (1998): "Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth—in a word, to know himself—so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves."[7]

To sum up this part: In the broadest sense, theology can mean natural theology, that is, metaphysically inclined philosophy, which, with the help of rational reflection, tries to fathom the very foundations of our world. It can also be an attempt at clarifying the message that people tied to a given religious revelation believe in. However, theology in the strictest, and for us the most important, sense, and – let's not be afraid to say it – true theology, can only be spoken of in the context of the Christian tradition, where God in whom we believe and whom we trust, ultimately reveals to us through his Son, not only that He is Love, which invites us into His Holy Family, a community of God's children, but also, that He is Logos. And as Logos, He wishes for us to unceasingly deepen our knowledge and understanding of Him.

II.

Now let us move on to the question of political theology. Its basis and assumption is noticing the close connection between how we understand our God and how we live our lives, including the shape of our political community. The image of God and His theological interpretation, which reveals the mutual connection between God and man, also sets an example for appropriate relationships among people and thus for the institutions they form. As Hegel wrote in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, "A nation which has a false

[7] John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html, 1998).

or bad conception of God, has also a bad State, bad government, bad laws."[8]

We could probably give many possible examples from history of various political organisms, illustrating that religion defines the lives of their communities: for instance, the multinational Roman Empire, with Jupiter at the head of a pantheon of gods, ever widened by the deities of subsequently conquered states; the Aztec state and its flower wars, from which they would bring back captives in order to make bloody sacrifices of them, and many, many others.

For us, however, the most important question seems to be what consequences for the organization of the life of a political community can result from the theology that is close to us and is related to Christian Revelation.

Is it possible to derive from it a standard for correct political practices, for example, a particular shape of a state system according to the Revelation? Those who are counting on it may be somewhat disappointed.

To put the matter radically, I pose the question another way: does a community of Christians, the Church, have to have an approach to politics at all? Does it need to envision, even if only very generally, a certain state system? Well, it would seem that this is not necessary.

First and foremost, what is specific to the Church and in it, the most important, is the matter of salvation, for which the historical and political conditions are merely an external stage. Whether in the Roman Empire or in a feudal monarchy, in a totalitarian state, or in a liberal-democratic state like the one we live in today, or even outside of any political community, as in a contemplative order or in the complete loneliness of a hermit, the same drama of God's love is taking place, waiting for the individual response of every individual person. To put it plainly, *politics is not at all necessary for salvation*. The Church would still remain the Church, even if the political realm were entirely moved out of its area of interest, and if instead of thinking how it could be influenced, were treated as the natural world, like, for instance, the weather. Then the Church would enjoy politically sunny days, hide from the rain and bravely endure natural political disasters. The first three centuries of Christianity, which

[8] Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Rev. E.B. Speirs, B.D., and J. Burdon Sanderson (trans.), London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, & CO. LTD., 1895, p. 247.

were, as a matter of fact, its period of greatest spiritual dynamics, show that such a possibility is not purely theoretical.

The thesis that the world of politics is not an appropriate domain for the Church finds strong confirmation in the Bible. In the Gospels, we find two statements made by Jesus that refer directly to this issue:

1. When asked by Pilate whether he is the king of the Jews, Jesus answers: "My kingdom is not of this world. (…) To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone that is of the truth heareth my voice." (J 18: 33-38)

2. When earlier asked by the Pharisees whether it is "lawful to give tribute unto Caesar or not?" Jesus replies, "Shew me the tribute money […], and he saith unto them, 'Whose is this image and superinscription?' They say unto him 'Caesar's.' And Jesus answering said unto to them, 'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.' " (Mt 22: 15-22; Mk 12: 13-17, Lk 20: 20-26)

3. We find also famous commentary on this second fragment in Saint Paul's *Epistle to the Romans* (Romans 13:1-7), but we can omit it here.

From the passages quoted above we can therefore conclude that in Christianity there is a clear distinction between the religious and political realms. But what is their relation? Where lies the domain of that which is divine and of that which is Caesar's? Is it possible to draw an exact boundary between the two? Indeed, the first of the Ten Commandments already sets out the impermeable limit, for both Jews and Christians, to the demand of political power, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me!" (Ex 20:3). When the state usurps the rights to divine prerogatives, a believer must be able to say "no." Moreover, Christians, unlike Jews, have known from the very beginning that their kingdom is not of this world, that they are citizens of another, heavenly fatherland, and that life within a given state and the responsibilities resulting from the fact do not bind them ultimately. In other words, the absolute point of reference will never, to them, be an order from the authorities, or even the good of the existing political community, but only the revealed will of God.

At the same time, however, there are no indications within the New Testament as to which model of the state a Christian could consider his own. The general statement made by Saint Paul in

his *Epistle to the Romans* (Romans 13:1-7) says that the role of the state authorities is to be "God's servants, agents of wrath"—to stand guard for justice and peace or, as it was later put, to be the "sword of justice"—this, of course, does not exceed the philosophical consciousness of that era.

We could say, almost jokingly, that Christian political theology seems to be somewhat negative, that it rather tells us what Christians should avoid in politics, that is, when they should say "no," whereas it does not formulate any positive statements, which would characterize a political community of Christians. What a Christian should say "yes" to, concerning issues of the state, remains undefined and open in the light of revelation, as though this empty space was left to be filled by the creative freedom of man, supported by the natural light of human reason. Let Pope Benedict XVI's words, from a speech in the Bundestag (22.09.2011), be a confirmation: "Unlike other great religions, Christianity has never proposed a revealed law to the State and to society, that is to say a juridical order derived from revelation. Instead, it has pointed to nature and reason as the true sources of law—and to the harmony of objective and subjective reason, which naturally presupposes that both spheres are rooted in the creative reason of God."[9]

In conclusion, it seems that it is not possible to construct an elaborate vision of Christian political theology, as it is minimal, apophatic. However, this situation leaves room for a rational reflection on politics. Christian political theology gives way to philosophy and even encourages the sensible practice of political philosophy.

III.

The thesis on the modesty of Christianity's approach to politics seems to be contradicted, however, by the fact that over the last two thousand years, in the name of Christianity and under its slogans, ruthless politics were imposed, wars were waged, states and institutions were established, and Christian political parties were formed. In such cases, is it not possible to also speak of some form

[9] Benedict XVI, *The Listening Heart Reflections on the Foundations of Law* (https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2011/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20110922_reichstag-berlin.html, 2011).

of political theology? Probably yes, but with a completely different meaning. If the idea of political theology expresses the conviction that reflection on politics must also take into consideration the religious and theological perspective, there is always still the question of how this is to be done. Or, in other words, which point of view—the political or religious and theological—is more important. The relationship between the religious or theological and the political may be twofold, depending on which perspective is dominant. The point is which is absolute: the political or the religious community? Ultimately, what here is God?

So far, we have spoken of political theology in looking at the possible consequences on politics that can be drawn from the contents of the Revelation. Political theology, in the second sense, serves politics and is submissive to its aims. In this sense, it is politics, or more accurately, temporal power, that turns out to be god. A god, which urgently needs an appropriate theology and for this purpose, employs his own theologians.

Since the earliest times it has been well known how important it is to obtain religious backing for the exercise of power and the execution of various political actions. Plato and Cicero wrote about it, as did, more contemporarily, Machiavelli. Rousseau's idea of a civil religion was based on this same principle of complete subordination to the state. Referring to newer examples, it is possible to distinguish certain trends in liberation theology, which have attempted to use the evangelical message to conduct a Marxist revolution. There is the famous image of Christ with a rifle. And a current example: the issue of refugees in Europe and the situation in which attempts are made to use the words of Jesus, "I was a stranger and you did not invite me in," (Mt 25:43) to exert political pressure on some European countries.

And now, at the very end, we can return to Carl Schmitt, who, by introducing the notion of political theology, was referring to just such a perspective on the relationship between politics and theology. Schmitt was convinced that every form of theology always serves some form of politics. For Schmitt, as is also true of many others, everything is political, that is, politics is of the utmost importance, and every other aspect of human life is ultimately subordinate to it. With such an approach, where politics reveals its absolute and total aspirations, even the Holy Trinity could be politically exploited and instrumentalized. It is therefore worth reading Schmitt as a warning

against the politicization of our thinking, which for him boils down to having the ability to recognize the enemies of one's community. But it is even more important to remember that the assertion that the political point of view is the absolute and most important point of view is nothing but an unjustified and dangerous demand.