

“Political Theology” A Deconstruction of Methodology

Carl Schmitt coupled these two words together, and in so doing initiated a discussion on political theology, the theology of politics, theological politics and the politics of theology. This discussion has not abated in almost a century and moves from the political left to the right and from functionalism to constructivism.¹ Schmitt’s best-known sayings ‘All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts’² and ‘The place occupied by the miracle in theology is in politics occupied by the [constitutional] exception’³ express this position well.

The concept of ‘political theology’ itself would appear to have long ago extended beyond the map drawn by Schmitt and is today widely used to describe a political environment, and very generally indicates the ‘habit’ of politicians or political groups of using the Church and ecclesiastical ideas in political discourse and in political actions.⁴ This latter usage, unlike the first, has a more anthropological meaning and researchers make skilful use of this when describing modern political discourses.

The main defect in Schmittian political theology is not the argumentation, but the environment in which Schmitt’s texts were written: on one side is German National Socialism and the Russian Revolution, which from the outset were extremely secular, and on the other side the equally extremely popular theories of Durkheim, Weber and Marx that confirmed the inevitable and absolute secularization of the future world, in contrast to the completely sacralised past.

It would appear that a belief in secularization underlies both usages of the concept of ‘political theology’: in the case of Schmitt and Schmittians (in the broadest sense) a belief that the modern world is secular; on the side of those who use the concept of ‘political theology’ more widely and descriptively, a belief that secularism is the basis of the liberal arrangement of the modern world, and that any use of ‘theology’ in political processes separates us from liberalism and democracy.

Schmitt was a lawyer. When he wrote about political theology he relied first and foremost on a comparison of written texts: political theories, constitutions and theological treatises. And since — for him — his modern political theory was based on a belief in secularism, whereas the medieval theological treatises were based on a concept of universal sacralisation, deciphering the

theology in a completely secular text is an experience that is interesting and has much to say.

As far as the descriptive users of 'political theology' are concerned, their belief concerning the inevitable connection between secularism and liberalism and/or democracy requires confirmation.

Politics has two vectors: the internal and the external. In a maximally descriptive or pragmatic definition, internal politics is the connection (written, verbal and actions) of those legitimately having or expressing power in a country with those individuals living in that country. Foreign politics is the relations between those having legitimate power in one country and those having legitimate power in another country.

In both cases the legitimization of power has immutable significance. Historically the Church fulfilled the function of the legitimization of power. It is possible in this case for us to call this legitimator 'theology', in the broadest sense, since the instrument of theology itself was often used to establish the legitimacy or illegitimacy of those having power.

However, not only is the legitimization of power as such important, but also the legitimacy of political actions. In the Middle Ages such legitimization was dual: that of God (from above) and that of the people (from below), to simplify it as much as possible. In the centre of these streams of legitimization was the ruler, who obtained legitimacy from God as the expresser of His will, and from the people as someone with concern for them. In the same way, it is possible for us to suppose that, owing to the Enlightenment on the one hand and to industrialization on the other,⁵ the course of the legitimization of power began to change. The creation of large groups having education and concrete political identity (nations) transferred the upper vector of legitimacy towards the people and the lower one towards religion. To put it in other words, power began to obtain legitimization from the people, as the expresser of their will and from the Church as having concern for it. It is to be expected that this concern is only as strong as the religiosity of the people whose will is expressed by the person having power. Accordingly, the use of 'theology' by politics is more of an indication of the type of society than anything else. In the same way as in the Middle Ages, frequently citing concern for the people so as to legitimize a political act indicated the strength of the existing groups 'in the people' and a distancing from official belief.

It would appear that we have seen through to a conclusion the deconstruction experiment we began. The use by politicians of concern for the Church or belief for their self-legitimization is conditioned by the religiosity of society. If we take into account that religiosity is increasing—and not decreasing—in the modern world,⁶ self-legitimization becomes an inseparable

part of modern politics through concern for religion. But the form religiosity has in a particular society sets the boundary between liberalism and anti-liberalism: either the more frequent adherence to a single religion, or religious diversity where a potentially politically active society is more or less evenly distributed across various confessions. In this latter case the politician is left with nothing but to seek legitimacy in a concern for belief and believers. And conversely, in a mono-religious society politicians are doomed to show concern for a single religion to various degrees. It depends on their consciences, values, world views and individual projects how far they will go 'from below' on the path to obtain legitimization.

Notes:

1. Erich Kofmel. *Comparative Political Theology*. Fourth General Conference of the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR), Section "Political Theology as Political Theory", Panel "Political Theology and Theological Politics", University of Pisa, Italy, 6 September 2007.
2. Carl Schmitt. *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. University of Chicago Press; University of Chicago edition, 2004 with an Introduction by Tracy B. Strong. Original publication: 1922, 2nd edn. 1934.
3. Die Diktatur. *Von den Anfängen des modernen Souveränitätsgedankens bis zum proletarischen Klassenkampf*, 1921.
4. Phillip W. Gray. "Carl Schmitt and Medieval Christian Political Thought." City University of Hong Kong. *Humanitas*. Volume XX, No. 1 and 2, 2007. J. Kameron Carter. "The Catastrophe of Political Theology: On Paik's From Utopia to Apocalypse." August 14, 2010. www.political-theology.com
5. Ernst Gellner. *Nations and Nationalism*. 1983.
6. Rodney Stark. "Secularization, R.I.P.," *Sociology of Religion*. 1999, 60:3. 249-273.