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Part I

The Shape of Contemporary Political Theology

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*Mid-Twentieth Century Origins of the
Contemporary Discipline*

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I European Political Theology

JÜRGEN MOLTSMANN

WHAT IS THE POINT OF POLITICAL THEOLOGY TODAY?

Isn't the modern world committed to the principle of strict separation of church and state and of religion and politics? Did we not secularize politics, when we made it democratic? Isn't it the case that in democracies "all power originates from the people"? What do the politicians of any country know about religion and what do the authorities of religious communities know about politics? If one speaks of "political theology," is one not advocating that we return to a situation in which theologians intervene politically, like the mullahs in Iran or the cardinals in the *ancien régime* in France, or even a situation in which one might envisage the establishment of a theocracy? How can there even be such a thing as a political theology, if the fundamental conviction of the modern world about politics and religion is that "religion is a private matter"?

My intention in this essay is to sketch a path from the old forms of politicized religion and theology to the New Political Theology of Christianity, which was fully engaged in criticism of public affairs in the tradition of prophets. When the terrorism of National Socialism was raging unabated on the streets of Germany, only a very few Christians protested; most retreated into the sphere of their private lives and obeyed the God-given "constituted authorities" (Rom. 13:1). The New Political Theology was born of this scandalous and shameful episode.

After Auschwitz, Christian faith is no longer a private matter in Germany, and theology belongs in the realm of the public discussion of political freedom, social justice, and the future of the earth. Apartheid was the origin in South Africa of a theology liberated from racism. "The poor" are the origin in Latin America for the development of a political theology of liberation. "Han," the pain and anger of the oppressed, was the origin in South Korea of the political Minjung-theology, a "theology of the people." White racism was the origin in the United States of the public theology of the civil rights movement under Dr. Martin Luther

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King Jr. Everywhere in the Christian world new political theologies have arisen, all of them with an ecumenical dimension. I limit myself in this essay to the developments in Europe and concentrate especially on those in Germany, because I have been a part of them.

There are at least four different types of political theology in Europe: (1) the theological formulation of the age-old political religion; (2) the modern conflict between anarchism and political sovereignty, and between terrorism and the politics of safety; (3) the New Political Theology of Christian resistance against privatization of faith and political idolatry; and (4) engagement for social justice, just peace, and the integrity of creation.

POLITICAL RELIGION

The term *political theology* was coined in pre-Christian stoic philosophy as the *genus politikon*: "Panaitius delineated three classes of God-figures: natural powers thought of as persons, the Gods of the state-religion, and the Gods of the myths (*genus physikon* *genus politikon* and *genus mythikon*)."¹ The Roman Marcus Terrentius Varro (116–27 BC) spoke of the "natural theology" of philosophers and the "political theology" of the citizens. Augustine referred to this distinction in *De Civitate Dei*.²

What was, and to some extent still is, political religion? According to the ancient doctrine of the state, worship of the gods of city, country, and empire is the state's supreme purpose (*finis principalis*). The state's gods provide for the prosperity and peace of the people, so the citizens must provide for their appropriate worship. The favor of these Gods is won through public sacrifice, but if there are famines, pestilences, natural catastrophes, and wars, they are signs that the gods are angry because of blasphemy, insufficient cultic observance, or the disobedience of the citizens. The people must do penance, as once in Nineveh, make special sacrifices, or slay the wicked who are in their midst.

To ensure the favor of the gods was the preeminent task of ancient rulers worldwide, for they all were priestly kings. The Roman Caesar was the *pontifex maximus* of Rome's state god. The Chinese emperor certainly stood over his subjects as "Son of Heaven," but if he fell into disfavor with heaven and his country was visited by famine, plague, earthquakes, and floods, he could be overthrown. The Moloch of Carthage demanded children as sacrifices; the Aztecs and Mayas offered their Gods still-quivering hearts. These political religions were *do ut des* religions in which the relationship between deity and worshippers

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was one of contractual exchange.³ Blasphemy was the worst of crimes, because it was not directed against human beings but against the protecting gods. The blasphemer had to be eliminated and put to death. In the late Roman Empire, Jews and Christians were persecuted whenever misfortunes and disasters happened. They were accused of “atheism” because they did not worship the Caesar cult.⁴ As late as 1706 the law and theology faculties in the University of Tübingen declared jointly: “That blasphemy was the most horrible and greatest of crimes, whereby God could easily be moved to wrath and could avenge the outrage on the whole land through famine, earthquake and pestilence.”⁵

Political religion embraced not only the human but also the natural world. The human state had to be governed in congruity with surrounding nature. The sovereign was responsible for peace not only in the human world but also in the world of nature. Chinese political religion was founded in the harmony of heaven and earth: in spring the emperor acted as the “first man of the land” at the agricultural altar in Beijing.

In the European tradition the correspondence between the monarchical structure of the cosmos and the political monarchy of the one ruler was observed.⁶ Aristotle quoted in his *Metaphysics* XII a word of Agamemnon in Homer’s *Iliad* (“But the world must not be governed badly: ‘The rule of the many is not good; let one be the ruler.’”)⁷ and turned this political idea into cosmology. The order of the cosmos is: one god – one logos/nomos – one universe. The corresponding political order is: one emperor – one law – one empire. This type of divine monarchy was always imperialistic. This was not limited to European monarchies. A famous word of the Mongol Lord Genghis Khan, reportedly spoken in 1254 to Franciscan monks who tried to convert him, shows that this was a universal political religion from Rome to China and everywhere: “In heaven there is no other than the one, eternal God, on earth there is no other than the single lord Genghis Khan, the Son of God. This is the word being said to you.”⁸ Monotheism – whether religious or metaphysical – served monarchism and imperialism in politics.

With the Constantinian turn, Christianity changed from a persecuted minority to a tolerated religion (*religio licita*) and finally to the general political religion of the Christian Empire. Byzantium became the center of the world and the mirror of heaven on earth.⁹ But the connected imperial claim overcharged the power and the possibilities of the state and was a reason for its decay. The originally critical Christian eschatology was changed into the political ideology of the Christian Empire: the kingdom of Christ has no end. The Christian Empire combined the *Pax Romana* with the *Pax Christi*. The Christian

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Caesar represented Christ the *cosmocrator*; his rule was an absolute rule, an *imitatio Dei* and an *imitatio mundi*. Political structure had to be understood as the image of heaven. Ceremony at court was a political liturgy worshipping God and his image on earth. The Christian Caesar was the unique source of power and law in the empire and his role was without limits. The Christian emperor was also the protector of the Christian church. In the name of the political imperial religion he had to unify the various churches and different theologies. Nicaea (325) and Chalcedon (450) were the results. Swords were converted into Christian swords and warfare limited by the criteria of a just war. This idea of a Christian political religion and theology was alive in Moscow, “the Third Rome,” until 1917.¹⁰ The symphony of religion and politics in this form is traditional Orthodox “political theology” until today. Constantine and Helena are saints and the last tsar and his family, killed in 1917, are venerated as holy by the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian people.

However, the Constantinian turn did not only create a Christian imperial religion but also – in opposition – a monastic movement. Beginning with Antonius in Egypt, Christians turned away from the world seeking the “beyond” in eremitic or monastic life.¹¹ Since that time we have, on the one hand, the Christianity of the world and, on the other hand, the Christianity of the religious orders; political secularization was answered with a religious desecularization.

On the theoretical level this was discussed between Erik Peterson and Carl Schmitt. The church historian Erik Peterson wrote his famous treatise “Monotheismus als politisches Problem” (1935) against the *Political Theology* of Carl Schmitt (1922, 1934) and defended the provocative theses: (1) The doctrine of the divine monarchy was already wrecked on the Trinitarian dogma, and (2) the *Pax Romana* idea failed the transcendent character of Christian eschatology. With these developments in Christian theology “monotheism as political problem” is “finished” and Christian faith was “liberated” from the political pressure of the Roman Empire.¹² Christian proclamation of the gospel can no longer be misused to justify political power: the mystery of the Trinity is only in God, not in a creature, and only God can give the peace Christians seek – no Caesar can do this.

Peterson wrote this treatise with salient reference to the year 1933 in Hitler’s Germany. Carl Schmitt answered in 1970 with a small book, *Politische Theologie II: Die Legende von der Erledigung jeder Politischen Theologie*.¹³ His argument was that theological critique does not do away with the theory and phenomenon of political religion;

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political theology is not only possible (contra Peterson) but is necessary until Christ's return. Neither Peterson nor Schmitt discussed a political theology of the crucified Christ, though Jesus was crucified in the name of the *Pax Romana*.

ANARCHISM/TERROR VERSUS SOVEREIGNTY/SAFETY

The modern concept of "political theology" was introduced into a now worldwide debate by the German professor of constitutional law, Carl Schmitt. His American partner was Leo Strauss. Schmitt took this term for his doctrine of political sovereignty from the Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin who wrote the book *Gott und der Staat* (1871) with the famous slogan: "Neither God nor state" (ni Dieu – ni maître). Bakunin condemned any domination of humans over humans in state and society and proclaimed liberation from divine and human authority. "If God is, man is a slave; now man can and must be free; then God does not exist."¹⁴ Satan was the first rebel, free thinker, and world liberator because he persuaded human beings to disobey God and eat the fruit of knowledge. Bakunin was a strong materialist: the human being is an animal and the brain a machine.

For Carl Schmitt, God and state constitute that sovereignty that is able to suppress Bakunin's "neither God nor state" anarchism. Schmitt did not borrow the term *political theology* from the ancient world but from Bakunin, who used the phrase as a derogatory label for the work of his opponent, Mazzini. Schmitt argued that "all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts."¹⁵ In his own political theology he referred to Catholic philosophers of the counterrevolution in the nineteenth century: Bonald, de Maistre, and Donoso Cortes. There is no medium between catholicity and atheism, and so there is no medium between authority and freedom. But what is sovereignty? "Sovereign is he who decides on the state of exception."¹⁶ Thus article 48 of the Weimar Constitution in Germany declared a "dictatorship of the president of the Reich."¹⁷ Schmitt defended the dictatorship of Hitler in 1933 as a legitimate act of political sovereignty: "The will of the Führer is law" because he believed "*non veritas sed auctoritas facit legem*."

Schmitt saw the conflict between the sovereignty of the state and anarchy against the background of the apocalypse of world history. He believed in the apocalyptic idea of the final battle at Armageddon of God against Satan, which was the reason, in his opinion, that the world was already engaged in a permanent civil war. He proclaimed

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the “friend-or-foe-relationship: whoever is not for us, is against us” and called this the existential political category. The archetype for this friend-or-foe distinction is the distinction between God and Satan, which is heading for a decisive battle.¹⁸ God’s revelation inaugurates this decision between those who believe and those who become enemies of God. Unbelief is blasphemy and rebellion against God. The fact that we have not yet reached this apocalyptic end of history is due to a mysterious *katechon* (2 Thess. 2:7). The power of delaying the end of the world by restraining evil is the sovereign authority of the state: “I believe in the *katechon*; for me he is the sole possibility for a Christian to understand history and find it meaningful.”¹⁹ The *katechon* is the evil-suppressing state and is for Schmitt the only explanation of the delay of the *parousia* of Christ.

The modern politics of safety against terrorism is very much like Carl Schmitt’s doctrine of unlimited sovereignty of the state against revolution and anarchy. Schmitt’s ideas are influential for conservatives and “neocons” in America, where his friend Leo Strauss popularized his thought. American politics reacted to the terror of 9/11 in 2001 with the Patriot Act, allowing the president to act as in a permanent state of exception. The results are suspension of civil liberties for American citizens, an illegitimate prison in Guantanamo, the unlimited surveillance of the world by the National Security Agency, and the killing of terrorists by drones where ever they may be found. “America is at war,” declared President George W. Bush. The friend-or-foe distinction suits the political doctrine of the United States. Since its inception there has been a dualistic doctrine of friend and foe, good and evil, apocalyptically oriented on the millennial role of “one country under God,” the “redeemer nation”²⁰ for the rest of the world.

THE NEW POLITICAL THEOLOGY

The New Political Theology emerged in Germany under the shock of Auschwitz. We survivors of World War II associated with the Shoah of the Jewish people not only the moral catastrophe of our own people but also the shame of Christianity. Why was there so little resistance? We found two patterns of behavior in the Catholic and Protestant political traditions, which apparently led to the failure of churches and Christians. First was the widespread opinion of the middle class that religion is a private matter and has nothing to do with public life and politics – an inward emigration that allowed external crimes to happen on the streets. Second was the Lutheran tradition of two kingdoms – the

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separation between spiritual and worldly powers that asserts that Christians are free in their faith but obedient to the given political power (Rom. 13). Only when the Nazis attacked the churches, forcing obedience to their ideology, did some Protestant congregations resist in the Confessing Church, whose Barmen Declaration of 1934 stated, "The Church must remain the Church." But there was no protest on behalf of persecuted Jews.

After a century-long antimodern defense strategy, the Roman Catholic Church opened itself to the world in Vatican II (1962–5). *Gaudium et Spes* and *Populorum Progressio* were influential for the famous *aggiornamento*. They demanded a new theology with its face to the world. Catholic fundamental theologian Johann Baptist Metz began with a "theology of the world," and saw the relationship of church and world in the light of a "political theology."²¹ He established political theology not as a special theological discipline in ethics or social teaching, but rather as the public consciousness of church and theology in modern times. In *Theology of the World*, Metz touched on two points: (1) Political theology is the critical correction of the privatization of modern religion ("Religion is a private matter") and of modern theology as transcendental, existential, or personalistic. (2) Political theology is a formulation of the eschatological Christian message under the condition of modern society. The church must become a "social-critical institution," and theology must be a liberating account of faith and hope.

Metz came to political theology through his teacher and friend Karl Rahner. Rahner had introduced the "anthropological turn" into modern Catholic theology. Metz went one step further: "The attempt to interpret theology in a totally existential or personalistic way is an important accomplishment of theology... This existential-anthropological theology, however, easily becomes isolated from the world and history, when eschatology is not seen to be more basic to theology. Only in the eschatological horizon of hope does the world appear as history."²² Because he understood my *Theology of Hope* so well at this point, I gladly took up his challenge ("Every eschatological theology must become a political theology which is a socio-critical theology"), and became the second representative of the New Political Theology in Germany.

What distinguished the New Political Theology from the old political theologies was the determining subject: the subject of the old political theologies was the political religion of the power of the state or of revolutionary movements; the subjects of the New Political Theology are the church and Christian communities in society. This is an important difference, because at the center of Christian faith stands not the

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divine monarchy, but the resurrection of the Christ who died on the Roman cross. For Metz, the cross of Christ is the reason why the scandal and the promise of salvation are public, not private or purely religious. Christ did not die between two candles on an altar but outside of the city, executed at Golgotha. Metz went on to develop his political theology further as a theology of the world of suffering and compassion.²³

The *Kirchenkampf* (church struggle) of 1934 to 1945 and the Confessing Church protest against the Nazi dictatorship left Protestant theologians after the war with the need for a political theology. Dietrich Bonhoeffer joined the military resistance and was murdered on April 9, 1945 at Flossenbürg.²⁴ Paul Tillich emigrated to New York in 1933. Karl Barth was forced to return to Switzerland in 1936. The first problem discussed was political preaching: Must the preacher avoid politics or must he or she prophetically address public questions? Does she or he know more about political solutions as every informed citizen, or must she or he address those who suffer under political power and those who are disoriented by those powers?

After the end of the alliance of throne and altar, the Protestant church was no longer a state-church. The church was to use her new freedom for prophetic public declarations and had to develop a public or political theology of her own. Apartheid, atomic rearmament, hunger in Africa, and homelessness in Germany became questions of Christian faith and ethics, and the answers were often different from the German government. Lutheran theologians revised their age-old doctrine of two kingdoms and became engaged in the public field for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation. But old state-church Christianity on the European continent had problems with democracy and civil liberties that developed in free-church contexts in America or in French *laïcité* (secularism).

I began my contribution to this conversation with a political theology of the cross.²⁵ With Pontius Pilate, a politician came into the Christian confession of faith. Jesus of Nazareth was condemned and executed as an enemy of the Roman Empire. The inscription on the cross told the reason for his execution: INRI, *Jesus Nazarenus Rex Judaeorum*. Whether this was an error or not is irrelevant. The empire condemned Jesus, but God raised the crucified one from the dead and elevated him to his kingdom. The Roman Empire is condemned by God, the Father of Jesus Christ.²⁶ What the state intended as shame received the highest glorification of God. Those who believe in the resurrection of the crucified one see the divine glory on the face of Christ and no longer in the face of the politically powerful. For those