

Non-Liberal, Antitotalitarian Catholic Thought in Twentieth-Century Germany

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Binary choices have always been part of political strategy. The rhetorical reduction of political identities as liberals and conservatives, moderns and reactionaries, West and East, helps us organize political issues, at the cost of missing the nuances and subtleties of political life. They simplify what is originally complex and diverse in political life, making decisions manageable – for example, through political parties. They often present the differences between “us” and “them” as irreconcilable. However, this simplification, which by its very nature implies some degree of *exclusion*, becomes problematic when contrasted with the democratic claim that pluralism is the necessary outcome of a society in which individuals are considered free and equal.

Isaiah Berlin’s distinction between negative and positive liberty illustrates the dangers of binary oppositions.² In Berlin’s opinion, positive liberty, beginning as a desire for self-mastery, degenerates into coercion, authoritarianism, and even totalitarianism when confronted with the question of the social implementation of the good life or the just order. Against this rather dire picture, Berlin asserts that only negative freedom – which asserts that I am free “to the degree to which no man or body of men interferes with my activity”³ – is compatible with a democratic regime, i.e., with a society composed of free persons. But we must ask: Is it really the case that negative liberty is the only, or the best solution to the problem of the diversity of human goals? Or even the only way to escape the terrors of

1. I am very grateful to Sara Lee and Taylor Putnam for their comments, and to the two anonymous reviewers, who pointed out important questions and suggestions that greatly improved this work.

2. Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 166-217.

3. Berlin, *Liberty*, 170.

totalitarianism? If Berlin were right – I think he is not⁴ – then Catholicism, and many other religious and spiritual traditions, would have to renounce its claim that truth, which human beings don't create but *receive*, is the precondition of freedom.

In this work, I question the liberal rhetoric that suggests that liberalism is the condition *sine qua non* of antitotalitarian politics. I study a tradition of non-liberal, antitotalitarian Catholic⁵ political thought in Germany. The thinkers reviewed here reject *both* liberalism and totalitarianism; they oppose the utopia of a perfect world achievable by human efforts, but at the same time warn us against the dismissal of Christian culture and its importance for political life. It is my conviction that if we abandon the logic of binary oppositions, their insights can stimulate a fruitful discussion about liberalism, political theology, and the modern world.

In the first section I study nineteenth-century Catholicism in Germany, focusing on the phenomenon known as *Kulturkampf*,⁶ in order to understand the ideological environment that surrounded the lives of Erik Peterson, Eric Voegelin,⁷ and Joseph Ratzinger. The historical record shows that liberalism resorted to binary oppositions to confront not only the Catholic Church, but also the women's movement. It also helps us understand why German Catholics became suspicious of liberalism after the *Kulturkampf*. The rest of the paper develops the thought of the three German thinkers, with two goals in mind. First, I suggest that liberalism is not the condition *sine qua non* of antitotalitarian politics; and secondly, I present both Peterson and

4. A solid critique of Berlin's doctrine of liberty is found in Charles Taylor's article, "What's Wrong with Negative Liberty," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences. Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 211-229.

5. It is important to note here that the roots of this thought must be traced back to Patristic thought. Erik Peterson's argument is dependent on Gregory of Nazianzus (329-390 CE), and Augustine (354-430 CE). Joseph Ratzinger has adopted Henri de Lubac's approach to theology as being the "echo" of Tradition. Both Peterson and Ratzinger understand themselves in a dialogue with the Church Fathers. I am indebted to the anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

6. See Michael B. Gross, *The War Against Catholicism. Liberalism and Anti-Catholic Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2005), 253-254.

7. I am aware that the inclusion of Eric Voegelin among "Catholic thinkers" is problematic. Voegelin was not a Catholic, he was rather an unclassifiable Christian. However, as I will show, there is an intellectual affinity (based on shared Catholic ideas) between Voegelin and these two Catholics, important enough to treat him as a companion to the other two.

Voegelin as strong influences in the political thought of Joseph Ratzinger, suggesting that this tradition is alive and active in the thought of one of the most important Catholic theologians of our time.

I

In *The War Against Catholicism*, Michael B. Gross provides a detailed, thoroughly documented history of the second half of the nineteenth century in Germany, which was marked by a cultural war against Catholicism. The (failed) liberal revolution of 1848 became a fertile soil for a Catholic counterrevolution. In the bishops' opinion, "people had been 'blinded' and 'bewildered,' 'bewitched' and 'bedazzled' by modern and fashionable philosophies: materialism, rationalism, liberalism and democracy."⁸ Against the powerful impetus of modernity, the Catholic Church organized a missionary crusade designed to rekindle piety and reinvigorate morality. These crusades began in 1849, and remained active until 1872, when the Jesuits and other religious orders were banned during the Kulturkampf. The missions' dynamics disrupted everyday routines in the cities and the country, to the point where most activities were suspended so as to free time to hear the sermons,⁹ which called people to convert in the hope of receiving the gift of everlasting life and avoiding damnation, and insisted on a moral renovation, emphasizing sexual morals and alcoholism. Missions were efficacious especially among the lower socioeconomic strata, although many aristocrats and bourgeois joined the crowds to hear the sermons and waited in line for confession.¹⁰ The conservative tone of missionary rhetoric was looked upon favorably by the state, although the power and influence of the missionaries, especially the Jesuits, triggered a cautious attitude, if not plain suspicion.¹¹

Outside Germany, conservatism was also the dominant tone in ecclesiastical matters. In 1832, Pope Gregory XVI issued his encyclical letter *Mirari Vos*, denouncing a world covered in darkness where "[d]epravity exults; science is impudent; liberty, dissolute. The holiness of the sacred

8. Gross, *The War Against Catholicism*, 31.

9. Gross, *The War Against Catholicism*, 39-41.

10. Gross, *The War Against Catholicism*, 57.

11. Jesuits were deemed an economic threat because of their exploitation of women (Gross, *The War Against Catholicism*, 112), as well as enemies of Enlightenment (*ibid.*, 94).

is despised; the majesty of divine worship is not only disapproved by evil men, but defiled and held up to ridicule.”¹² He denounced “indifferentism,” freedom of conscience (an “absurd and erroneous presupposition,” §14), and the freedom of the press. More important for our purposes, however, is Pius IX’s *Syllabus* of 1864, which anathematized eighty doctrinal mistakes, including various condemnations against nineteenth-century liberalism.¹³

In their fight against Catholicism, liberals in Germany adopted binary oppositions, such as sloth/industry, obsolescence/progress, fanaticism/reason, celibacy/family, and medieval/freedom.¹⁴ They sided with Protestants, whom they associated with rationalism, freedom (from the institution, to interpret Scriptures, etc.), and an aversion to authority. In the liberal mind there wasn’t any room for compromise: it was progress or backwardness, light or darkness. Moreover, liberals also gendered their attacks on Catholicism: the Church was identified as “feminine” while the state was considered “masculine.” Liberals opposed both the Catholic Church – symbolized by the “effeminate” priest¹⁵ – as well as the women’s movement for social and political emancipation: “Liberal men from the left to the right... overwhelmingly rejected outright the notion that women were autonomous individuals, defined not simply by marriage and the family but entitled to equal social, legal, political, and citizen rights.”¹⁶ Liberals saw a correspondence between the public/private division and gendered roles, where males were naturally fit for public service, politics, and the economy, and females were oriented towards the family and piety. While the Church was in no way the vanguard of gender politics, Catholic women took part in the German society – through groups, associations, charities, etc. – creating spaces for the development and autonomy of women as nurses, teachers,

12. Gregory XVI, *Mirari Vos* (1832), §5, available at <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/greg16/g16mirar.htm> (accessed on Dec. 5, 2017).

13. Especially important are the condemnation of claims such as: “in the present day it is no longer expedient that the Catholic religion should be held as the only religion of the State” (§77), “persons... shall enjoy the public exercise of their own peculiar worship” (§78), and “the Roman Pontiff can, and ought to, reconcile himself, and come to terms with progress, liberalism and modern civilization” (§80). Pius IX, *Syllabus of Errors* (1864), available at <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/pius09/p9syll.htm> (accessed on Dec. 5, 2017).

14. Gross, *The War Against Catholicism*, 181, cf. 102.

15. Gross, *The War Against Catholicism*, 143.

16. Gross, *The War Against Catholicism*, 195.

welfare workers, and administrative personnel.¹⁷

In 1870, with the German victory over France and the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine, liberals sided with Bismarck and proposed a series of anti-Catholic legislation. In 1871 a law made “public discussion of matters of state by clerics ‘in a manner endangering public peace’ a criminal offense.”¹⁸ In 1872, supervision of the schools by the churches was abolished, and the Society of Jesus and other religious orders were banned. In 1873, the May Laws “provided for the state examination of clerics and state approval of all clerical appointments.”¹⁹

The reaction of the Catholic population against the Kulturkampf was energetic. The 1874 election made clear that the people were with the Jesuits and against the Kulturkampf: many Catholic members of the Liberal party who had sided with the Kulturkampf lost their seats.²⁰ It became clear that “most of the Catholic voting population decided that it was impossible now to be both Catholic and liberal.”²¹

Four decades later, the Weimar republic was “Germany’s first democratic republic, which came into being as a result of unprecedented global war and global defeat after the moral and political bankruptcy of its predecessor, Imperial Germany, became palpably indefensible.”²² Eric D. Weitz divides Weimar’s political history into three periods: one dominated by the left and center (1918-1923); another where the center right predominated (1924-1929); and the last one under the control of the authoritarian rule (1930-1933). It is telling that, in the first period, the coalition that “took up the cause of liberal political reform” included the Catholic Center Party, which was deeply influenced by bishops and clergymen.²³ However, and “[d]espite its very prominent role in the republic... Catholics retained in the 1920s their sense of grievance in a Protestant-dominated country... Catholic memories of the Kulturkampf... were long.”²⁴ On the Protestant side, on the

17. Gross, *The War Against Catholicism*, 215-219.

18. Gross, *The War Against Catholicism*, 255.

19. Gross, *The War Against Catholicism*, 252.

20. Gross, *The War Against Catholicism*, 275.

21. Gross, *The War Against Catholicism*, 277.

22. Rudy Koshar, “Introduction,” in *The Weimar Moment: Liberalism, Political Theology, and Law*, eds. Leonard V. Kaplan and Rudy Koshar (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2012), xi.

23. Koshar, “Introduction,” xiv.

24. Eric D. Weitz, *Weimar Germany: Promises and Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University

other hand, the separation between “throne and altar” was felt as a loss of the influence it had had during the Kulturkampf years. Just as Catholics had done decades before, Protestants distanced themselves from liberals.

The shadow of the Kulturkampf made Catholics suspicious of Weimar politics: they rejected liberal programs, reaffirming instead “traditional Christian teachings on the close link between church and state,”²⁵ but they didn’t unreflexively join the Nazi party.²⁶ As Weitz claims, both Protestants and Catholics “kept their options open.”²⁷ The lack of support of important sectors of the German society, as well as the constant attacks from the radical right, led to the fall of Weimar society and the rise of Hitler and Nazism. However, while many Christians sympathized with them – like the prominent Protestant theologians, Paul Althaus and Emanuel Hirsch, and the Catholic jurist, Carl Schmitt – many others opposed the totalitarian regime, like Joseph Pieper, Romano Guardini, Dietrich von Hildebrand, and Cardinals Clemens August von Galen and Michael von Faulhaber.

II

In *Monotheism as a Political Problem*, Erik Peterson studied the theologico-political imagination of early Christianity. His book, published in 1935, was intended as “a blow to *Reichstheologie*.”²⁸ His starting point is a quote from the Iliad, at the end of book XII of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* – “the rule of many is not good, let one be ruler”²⁹ – the development of which he follows in the pseudo-Aristotelian treatise *De mundo* and in the Jewish philosopher Philo. While Aristotle presents god as the transcendent goal (*telos*) and Prime Mover, the author of *De mundo* understands the divine Being as the “presupposition for the existence of *potestas (dynamis)*,” thus

Press, 2007), 94.

25. Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 340. See Klaus Tanner, “Protestant Revolt against Modernity,” in *The Weimar Moment*, eds. Kaplan and Koshar, 10.

26. See Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, “German Catholicism in 1933,” *Cross Currents* 11, no. 3 (1961), 283-304.

27. Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 340.

28. Peterson’s letter to Friedrich Dessauer, quoted in Artur Mrówczyński-Van Allen, “Beyond Political Theology and its Liquidation: From Theopolitical Monotheism to Trinitarianism,” *Modern Theology* 33, no. 4 (2017): 579.

29. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 12.1076a 3ff, quoted in Erik Peterson, *Theological Tractates*, trans. Michael J. Hollerich (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 69.

transforming a metaphysical argument into a political one. Philo applied the term “monarchy” to Israel: since the God of the Jews is not one god among many, but the only God, creator of the universe, i.e., the cosmic monarch, then his people, Israel, “become priests and prophets for the whole human race.”³⁰ He then reviews the works of Justin, Cyril of Jerusalem, Tartan, Theophilus of Antioch, and Tertullian in order to show how the notion of “monarchy” was introduced in Christian thinking. Tertullian, for example, refuted Praxeas’ identification of the Son with the Father through the term “monarchy,” defending the possibility of a non-divided divine Monarchy: “if the son should also be appointed to participate in it... it is still a monarchy, which is held jointly by the two as unified.”³¹

Peterson notes that “the same argumentation that Tertullian uses to define the relation of the Son and the Holy Spirit was used outside of the Church as a justification for polytheism.”³² The idea of a monarchy composed of many persons could suggest, polytheists had argued before him, a hierarchical heaven populated by major and minor gods, where the *one*, great god rules over them. This was the basis for Celsus’ attack on Christianity for revolting against the theologico-political order of polytheism.

Many Christian thinkers saw the emergence of the Roman Empire, as well as the peace brought by it, as a providential design for the Christianization of the world. Origen read Psalm 72:7 as a prophecy referring to Rome, and Eusebius linked together the end of Jewish kingship, Augustus’ monarchy, and the birth of the Messiah.³³ His work served two goals: it refuted Celsus’ attack on Christianity as a cause of disorder and rebellion, and created a Christian political theology. By joining the Roman Empire and Jesus’ redemption together, Eusebius linked God’s monarchy and earthly political authority. The Roman Empire was God’s plan, and its authority was willed by the Lord of History.³⁴

30. Peterson, *Theological Tractates*, 73.

31. Peterson, *Theological Tractates*, 82.

32. Peterson, *Theological Tractates*, 82.

33. Peterson, *Theological Tractates*, 92.

34. “For Peterson, monotheism denotes the false alliance of church and state first established in the realm of Christendom by emperor Constantine and theorized by his biographer Eusebius. In essence, however, the doctrine of cesaro-papism, as it came to be called, is to Peterson a Jewish heresy” (Michael Zank, “Strauss, Schmitt, and Peterson, or: Comparative Contours

Peterson contends that “the phrase [‘Divine Monarchy’] loses its political-theological character alongside the orthodox dogma.”³⁵ He stresses the impossibility of any Christian political-theology by leaning on Gregory of Nazianzus, for whom the unity of the triune God “doesn’t find correspondence in the created order,”³⁶ and Augustine, who opposed the identification of the Pax Romana with the peace announced in the psalms. György Géreby concludes from Augustine that “a thoroughly eschatological view of the church cannot look on *any* existing political order as fulfilling the promise of the heavenly Jerusalem and the *coming* kingdom of God.”³⁷

In his article, *The Church*, written amid his conversion to Catholicism, Peterson interprets the eleventh chapter of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans as a presentation of his “Doctrine of the Last Things.” Paul’s eschatology (Rom 11:25) reveals that the kingdom of God will come when the Gentiles, and *after* them, the Jews, convert. Since the Jews, the people of God (Ex 6:7; Jer 30:22) hardened their hearts and refused to believe (Acts 13:26), God had mercy on the gentiles (Hos 1:10), without forgetting his promise to the chosen people, which will be fulfilled in the end of times (Is 59:20-21). The time of the Church exists since Pentecost (Acts 2:4) – wherein the gift of tongues signalizes the abandonment of Hebrew as the holy language and the time of the gentiles – and until Christ returns and the kingdom of God comes.³⁸ The Church, thus, exists to fulfill the eschatological itinerary that

of the ‘Theological-Political Predicament,’” in *German-Jewish Thought Between Religion and Politics*, eds. Christian Wiese and Martina Urban [Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012], 324).

35. Zank, “Comparative Contours,” 103.

36. Zank, “Comparative Contours,” 103. Arthur Mrówczyński-Van Allen points out an inconsistency in Peterson’s thought. Peterson, he claims, incorrectly identified monotheism with Monarchianism, misreading Gregory of Nazianzus – his main source for advocating the end of political theology – and thus failing to land his blow (Mrówczyński-Van Allen, “Beyond Political Theology,” 11).

37. György Geréby, “Political Theology versus Theological Politics: Erik Peterson and Carl Schmitt,” *New German Critique* 7, no. 33 (2008): 20. Elshtain claims that, for Augustine, “any identification of the city of God with an earthly order invites sacralization of human arrangements and a dangerous idolatry” (Jean Bethke Elshtain, “Augustine,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, eds. Peter Scott and William Cavanaugh [Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004], 42).

38. In *Divine Monarchy* Peterson quotes Gregory of Elvira: “Whoever would want to realize the divine monarchy on earth would be like the Antichrist, for it is him who alone will be the monarch of the whole earth [*ipse solus toto orbe monarchiam habiturus est*],” quoted in Geréby,

will end with the conversion of the Jews.

From all this Peterson deduces that political theology, that is, investing a concrete political form with a theological justification, amounts to an undue immanentization of the notion of “God’s kingdom,” which can only be understood eschatologically. This is consistent with Peterson’s article *Christ as Imperator*, where he emphasizes that “Christ is... king, and not emperor, of the *coming aeon*,”³⁹ and with his claim, in *The Book of Angels*, that Christianity implies the abandonment of the earthly Jerusalem: “The earthly Jerusalem, with the Temple cult, is clearly the point of departure for the ideas and images of early Christian literature, though this point of departure has now been left behind and Jerusalem as a political entity, city as well as place of worship, is no longer found on earth but in ‘heaven,’ to which Christians’ eyes are turned.”⁴⁰

Peterson’s attempted blow to *Reichstheologie* was also an attack on Carl Schmitt’s political theology, first developed in his 1922 book *Political Theology*, wherein Schmitt famously declared that “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development...but also because of their systematic structure.”⁴¹

Schmitt, a conservative jurist, saw the emergence of the sovereign state in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as the great European achievement. However, the modern, secular, and liberal eighteenth century opted for a separation of orders and, worse, for the emphasis on the economy over the political.⁴² To the economic world of the modern bourgeoisie Schmitt juxtaposed the Catholic Church as an institution. The political importance of the Catholic Church is its ability to “represent” the *civitas humana*, to be

“Political Theology versus Theological Politics,” 20-1.

39. Peterson, *Theological Tractates*, 149, emphasis is mine.

40. Peterson, *Theological Tractates*, 107-108. Cf. Mrówczyński-Van Allen, “Beyond Political Theology and its Liquidation,” 3-4.

41. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 36.

42. “The world-view of the modern capitalist is the same as that of the industrial proletarian, as if the one were the twin brother of the other... The big industrialist has no other ideal than that of Lenin – an ‘electrified earth.’ They disagree essentially only on the correct method of electrification” (Carl Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, trans. G. L. Ulmen [Westport: Greenwood Press, 1966], 13).

the connecting aeon between Pentecost and the Second Coming,⁴³ and for that very reason, a specific kind of authority that is nowhere to be found in modern societies. The pope, as the vicar of Christ, represents God's authority, which is reflected in juridical form (canonical law), but more important, he brings back the notion of "sovereign," who in Schmitt's political theory is the one who decides on the exception.⁴⁴ The modern bourgeoisie, on the contrary, is unable to create representation, contenting itself, instead, with "the fateful dualism of the age" and its "polarities."⁴⁵

The questions that the Catholic Church solves, unlike liberalism, are two: *Quis iudicabit?* and *Quis interpretatur?*⁴⁶ In the interim between Pentecost and Christ's return, the Church solves the *political* problem of decision and interpretation in a way that the secularized theory of the sovereign state will resemble: sovereignty corresponds to God's omnipotence, exception to the miracle, and so on. That the sovereign is "he who decides on the exception"⁴⁷ tells us that, for Schmitt, the important question about law is not primarily its content, but its "adscription" or "competence," which is "a question that cannot be raised by and much less answered from the content of the legal quality of a maxim."⁴⁸

Schmitt's answer to Peterson was written thirty-five years later. In *Political Theology II*, he addressed Peterson's two claims for rejecting political theology: first, that the Trinitarian God of Christianity finds no correspondence in the natural world; and second, Peterson's rejection of the Pax Romana as an eschatological sign. He left aside the argument on the nature of the kingdom. Against these claims, Schmitt argues, first, that Peterson's article focuses on monarchy: "the accurate, central, and systematic concept for the politico-theological problem that Peterson discusses cannot be oriented towards monarchy, but has to be oriented towards political unity

43. Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism*, 19.

44. See Roberto Esposito, *Two: The Machine of Political Theology and the Place of Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 42-44.

45. Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism*, 20.

46. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology II*, trans. Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward (Malden: Polity, 2008), 115; cf. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 43.

47. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 5.

48. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 33.

and its presence or representation.”⁴⁹ This move allows Schmitt to introduce the Hobbesian sovereign, who can be a person or an assembly, making room for non-monarchical political theologies, such as democracy.⁵⁰ Secondly, he criticizes Peterson’s highly abstract separation between “pure theology” and “impure politics.”⁵¹

Schmitt’s understanding of “political theology” is more complex than Peterson’s. For the former, political theology refers *only* to the use of Christian theology as the form of a regime; it implies the claim that the human (political) society somehow *reflects* the divine essence. In Schmitt’s work, the concept is stretched to include people’s reading of human history as the work of divine providence.⁵²

On another level, Jesus’ hypostatic union makes the tension between *logos* and *sarx* inescapable. In the words of Roberto Esposito, “the basic problem posed by Schmitt is the inevitable presence of the Two in the figure of the Incarnation, with which the Trinitarian principle is closely connected in Christian dogma.”⁵³ The Church exists in this world while at the same time escaping it, as a pilgrim that knows that the earth her feet touch is transient, that it can only use what it possesses to prepare what will come.⁵⁴ Peterson is aware of this tension. The Church, he admits, “is not in a univocal sense a religious-political entity such as was the messianic Kingdom of the Jews.

49. Schmitt, *Political Theology II*, 72. Representation is the central feature that Schmitt finds praiseworthy in the preconciliar Catholic Church. Following Hans Barion’s criticism of the constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (§74), he laments that the council “has taken away the basis for the eulogy” he tried to make in *Roman Catholicism and Political Form* (Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 46-47).

50. See Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 54-55, 74.

51. “Peterson’s argument revolves around a distinction between the purely theological and the impurely political, in an abstract and absolute disjunction which enables him to circumvent the mixed nature of the spiritual-secular combination of any specifically historical event” (Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 92).

52. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 87.

53. Esposito, *Two*, 62.

54. A radical (condemned as heretical) interpretation of this tension is found in Ticonius, the African Donatist who lived in the fourth century. Ticonius proposed the doctrine of the Church’s “*corpus bipartitum*,” stating that “the Church’s one body has two sides: the left and the right, the first a sinner and the latter filled with grace; but both belong to the one and only body” (Joseph Ratzinger, *El Nuevo Pueblo de Dios* [Barcelona: Herder, 1972], 22). Translation is mine.

But she is also not a purely spiritual entity, in which such concepts as politics and sovereignty may not, as such, appear, as though she were restricted to ‘service.’”⁵⁵ What Peterson emphasizes is the absolute otherness of God’s kingdom, the impossibility to fulfil, here and now, this new era.

The tension becomes explicit at this point. Contrary to civil religions, for Christianity it is God who comes to humanity and starts the dialogue. Theology thus abandons the political, first, because the form of communication unveils the infinite distance between the interlocutors (a distance the political cannot mirror); and second, because of the message itself: divine *economy* is inimitable by human politics, the kingdom is not of this world, etc.⁵⁶ At the same time, revelation must be interpreted. But even when Christ solved the problems of decision and interpretation (Mt 16:13-20), the Christian message, which starts with Christ’s hypostatic union, breaks the infinite distance, joins together *logos* and *sarx*, and reconceptualises human existence eschatologically. Consequently, all human history is theologically informed, *including politics*. This brings back Schmitt’s questions, forcing new decisions and interpretations that inevitably fall under the field of political theology.⁵⁷

Schmitt accused Peterson of ignoring “the crisis of the modern problematic of church/state/society,”⁵⁸ thus failing to establish why the case of Eusebius and the Roman Empire is exemplary,⁵⁹ and of not seeing that “you cannot compare the context of a Greek church father of the Nicaean Council with that of a Latin church father under the rule of the Vandals.”⁶⁰ However, Jacob Taubes read Peterson’s article and, particularly, his reference to Augustine’s *City of God*, as an urgent warning to Schmitt. In a letter to

55. Peterson, *Theological Tractates*, 38. Schmitt was aware of this idea (*Political Theology II*, 87).

56. See Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. Lorenzo Chisea (with Matteo Mandarini) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), chapter 2.

57. This is why Esposito claims that “the terminus technicus of persona acted as a semantic transformer in the workings of the political-theological machine” (Esposito, *Two*, 84). Christ’s hypostatic union (two “persons” in one), as well as the Trinity (three “persons” in one) are at the root of the machine, by “expressing a unity through a division” (Esposito, *Two*, 84).

58. Schmitt, *Political Theology II*, 44.

59. Schmitt, *Political Theology II*, 63.

60. Schmitt, *Political Theology II*, 98.

Schmitt, written in 1979, Taubes confides:

You yourself have established that the term *Führer* is unique, as is the reference to “Christian ideology” for Eusebius’s *theologumenon*. Also astonishing is the reference to *Civitas Dei* III.30, which has nothing “historical,” but which in 1935 was shockingly contemporary: *caecus atque improvidus futurorum*,⁶¹ a coded warning to you – which you never received. You have had no better friend than Peterson to put you on the path to the Christian Church.⁶²

In Taubes’ analysis, Peterson’s work acquires an urgent, contemporary tone. Confronted with the emergence of the Nazi terror, he delivered a message to Schmitt ciphered inside an Augustinian quote. This message, Taubes laments, was never received.

III

Eric Voegelin explicitly acknowledged Peterson’s claim against political theology.⁶³ In his most known work, *The New Science of Politics*, he subscribes to his critique of Eusebius and arrives at Peterson’s conclusion that “this is the end of political theology in Orthodox Christianity.”⁶⁴

Voegelin singles out two major developments in the history of political ideas that have influenced our understanding of human existence.⁶⁵ First, the Platonic “anthropological principle,” which stated that the micro-cosmos of the individual is recreated in the macro-cosmos of the *polis*, that is, that “every society reflects the type of men of whom it is composed.”⁶⁶ Second, the Christian “theological principle” that opened the way for communication

61. “Blind and reckless about what was to come.”

62. Jacob Taubes, *To Carl Schmitt: Letters and Reflections* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 28.

63. See Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952), 102n76.

64. Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 106.

65. This is Voegelin’s “principle of maximal differentiation”: “theory is bound by history in the sense of differentiating experiences. Since maximum differentiation was achieved through Greek philosophy and Christianity, this means theory is bound to move within the historical horizon of classic and Christian experiences. To recede from the maximum of differentiation is theoretical retrogression; it will result in the various types of derailment which Plato has characterized as *doxa*” (Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 79-80).

66. Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 62.

between God and human beings to the point where, for Christianity, “the fact of revelation is its content.”⁶⁷ The end of the theologico-political means, for Voegelin, the de-divinization of the world, that is, the end of “political religions,” which existed before Christianity (e.g. the solar cult of Aton under the reign of Akhenaton, between 1405-1307 B.C.), and after it. These re-divinization projects are at the forefront of Voegelin’s project.

In *Political Religions* – his last book written before he fled Germany in 1938 – Voegelin attacked “political religions,” singling out Nazism as a “Satanic force,” a substantial evil threatening to devour the existence of individuals.⁶⁸ Political religions operate on the symbolic level, that is, they function as mechanisms of *representation*.⁶⁹ The “political” dimension of political religion becomes visible in the process of articulation, understood as a force applied on the social body, which ultimately finds the State as the “primal ruling power.”⁷⁰ The “religious” dimension, on the other hand, is identifiable in that the justification of the ruling power is done by linking sovereignty and a metareality – what Voegelin calls the *Realissimum* – that signals the “true” human existence, or its connection with Being. Voegelin distinguishes between “world-transcendent religions,” which locate the *Realissimum* outside this world, and “world-immanent religions,” which keep it in this world.⁷¹

For Voegelin, the development of world-immanent religions, or political religions, is linked to modern gnosticism⁷². In *Ersatz Religion*, he identifies

67. Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 78.

68. Voegelin rejects Augustine’s famous doctrine of evil as absence, (*The City of God*, XI:9) in order to introduce National Socialism as a radical evil: “A religious view of National Socialism must proceed from the assumption that there is evil in the world. To be sure, evil not only as a deficient mode of Being, something negative, but rather as a genuine, effective substance and force in the world. A not merely morally bad, but also a religiously evil, Satanic substance can only be opposed by an equally strong, religiously good force of resistance. A Satanic force cannot be combated with morality and humanism alone” (*Political Religions*, trans. T.J. DiNapoli and E.S. Easterly III [New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1986], 2).

69. “In order to come into existence, a society must articulate itself by producing a representative that will act for it” (Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 41). Note the resemblance with Schmitt.

70. Voegelin, *Political Religions*, 6.

71. Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 12-14.

72. In his autobiographical reflections, Voegelin recognizes that “[s]ince my first applications of Gnosticism to modern phenomena... I have had to revise my position. The application of the

progressivism, positivism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, communism, fascism, and national socialism as gnostic movements.⁷³ Gnostics are dissatisfied with the world, the wickedness of which they attribute to a defective creation by a wicked god. Notwithstanding its vicious origin, gnostics believe the world can change, and that hope is in our hands: it is through knowledge (*gnosis*) that the order of being will be changed. Against Christianity, which denies that this world can ever be perfect – or perfected by human hands alone – and opposes to this world the Kingdom of God that we can only glimpse at through faith,⁷⁴ gnosticism sees “a concrete society and its order as an eschaton.”⁷⁵

The gnostic approach consists in the immanentization of basic symbols in order to collapse the distinction between man and God, that is, the *divinization* of man.⁷⁶ Notions of “hierarchy,” “ekklesia,” “spiritual/temporal,” and the Apocalypse are used by gnosticism in its quest for a perfect world, here-and-now, that human beings will build for ourselves. If we take, for example, National Socialism, we can see that the notion of “ekklesia,” which for Christian theology cannot be understood as *just* immanent, is identified with the *Volk*. Voegelin explains that for both Italian

category of Gnosticism to modern ideologies, of course, stands. In a more complete analysis, however, there are other factors to be considered in addition,” such as the apocalypse deriving from the Israelites prophets. Some lines after, he claims: “I found, furthermore, that neither the apocalyptic nor the gnostic strand completely account for the process of immanentization. This factor has independent origins in the revival of neo-Platonism in Florence in the fifteenth century” (Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections* [Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2011], 93).

73. Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* (Chicago: Gateway, 1968), 57.

74. “The tension between a different truth of the soul and the truth of society cannot be eliminated from historical reality by throwing out the one or the other. Faith is the anticipation of a supernatural perfection of man; it is not this perfection itself. The realm of God is not of this world; and the representative of the *civitas Dei* in history, the church, is not a substitute for civil society” (Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 157).

75. Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 166.

76. It is difficult not to read the “Satanic character” of Nazism that Voegelin denounces in Biblical terms. The idea of the divinization of humanity is the Devil’s machination (“you will be like God,” Gen 3:5). Satan reformulated this temptation, which caused the Fall, in his encounter with Jesus. Satan took Jesus to a high mountain, and showing him all the kingdoms of the world, said to him: “All this I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me” (Mt 4:8-9). What does the adoration of the devil, the Prince of this World (Jn 14:30), mean but the divinization of the immanent world?

Fascism and German National Socialism, “[t]he sacred substance... is the spirit of the people or the objective spirit, a *Realissimum* lasting through the ages which becomes historical reality in individual men as members of their *Volk* and in their works.”⁷⁷

Voegelin stresses that the order of being is something *given*, under no man’s control.⁷⁸ Now, in order for gnosticism to be able to re-divinize the immanent world, “the givenness of the order of being must be obliterated; the order of being must be interpreted, rather, as essentially under man’s control. And taking control of being further requires that the transcendent origin of being be obliterated: it requires the decapitation of being – the murder of God.”⁷⁹ This need for absolute emancipation is clear in Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: “If there were gods, how could I endure not being a god! Therefore, there are no gods!”⁸⁰ Voegelin also refers to Hegel, for whom “God has died because he was no more than a phase of consciousness that is now outmoded. And it is outmoded because consciousness in its dialectical progress has gone beyond it.”⁸¹

The criticism Voegelin directs against gnosticism and political religions rests on two main premises. In the first place, gnostic movements are possible only by suppressing a significative part of reality: Thomas More’s *Utopia* suppresses man’s lust for property, a consequence of original sin, in order to present a perfect society that has abolished private property; Thomas Hobbes obliterates the *summum bonum* in order to present, on the contrary, the *summum malum*, the fear of violent death, as the dominant human passion, against which he will oppose his *Leviathan*, the first modern political religion; and Hegel excludes “the mystery of a history that wends its way into the future without our knowing its end,” and thus presents his theory of history as a “meaningfully self-contained process of history.”⁸² Secondly, and as a consequence of this omission, gnosticism must prohibit any questioning that puts the doctrine in jeopardy. Marx, for example, admonishes his socialist pupil: “Give up your abstraction and you will give

77. Voegelin, *Political Religions*, 67.

78. Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 35.

79. Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 35-36.

80. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), Part Two, §2: “Upon the Blessed Isles,” quoted in Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 36.

81. Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 47.

82. Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 72.

up your question along with it.”⁸³ Questioning leads to the unmasking of the system as a falsification of reality, and thus needs to be precluded at all cost.

In close connection with his rejection of gnosticism and political religions, Voegelin shares Peterson’s dismissal of political theology, denouncing it as the attempt to immanentize what is essentially transcendent, an anxiety to control what escapes human control, and a yearning to be like God. He dismisses the identification of Christianity with political movements or with revolutionary attempts to change the world once and for all.⁸⁴ While “uncertainty is the very essence of Christianity,”⁸⁵ gnosticism rejects the imposition of any limits on knowledge, confident in its ability to subdue and transform this world. This doesn’t mean that Christianity preaches passivity and indifference towards the world; what it teaches is that there is a limit to human understanding and power, and that the effort to overcome these limits is futile, leading only to a caricature of a divinized human being which will find in the Nazi *Führer* its most hubristic and horrific manifestation.

Despite his uncompromising critique of political religions, Voegelin doesn’t see a clear-cut distinction between politics and religion. In the epilogue to *Political Religions*, he makes this point clear:

[T]he life of men in a political community cannot be defined as a profane sphere, in which we only have to deal with questions of organizations, of law, and of power. The community is also a realm of religious order, and the recognition of a political situation is incomplete in one decisive point if it does not also embrace the religious forces of the community and the symbols in which they find expression; or indeed, if it embraces them but does not recognize them as such, but rather translates them into a-religious categories. Man lives in the political community with all aspects of his being from the corporeal to the spiritual and

83. Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 17.

84. “[T]here is no passage in the New Testament from which advice for revolutionary political action could be extracted. The Gnostic revolutionary, however, interprets the coming of the realm as an event that requires his military co-operation” (Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 145).

85. Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 122. Elsewhere he claims that “with the refinement and clarification of the relationship between God and man, the moment of uncertainty, and with it the need for more solid certainty, is intensified” (Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 76).

religious.⁸⁶

Christianity created a tension between reason and revelation,⁸⁷ between the political community and the eternal community of the children of God, by bringing about the “idea of a universal community of mankind, beyond civil society, through the participation of all men in the common measure.”⁸⁸ Hence:

we must distinguish between the opening of the soul as an epoch in experiential differentiation and the structure of reality which remains unchanged. From the distinction it follows for the present problem that the tension between a different truth of the soul and the truth of society cannot be eliminated from historical reality by throwing out the one or the other. Faith is the anticipation of a supernatural perfection of man; it is not this perfection itself. The realm of God is not of this world; and the representative of the *civitas Dei* in history, the church, is not a substitute for civil society.⁸⁹

IV

Joseph Ratzinger has repeatedly denounced the horrors of totalitarianism, leaning instead towards democracy as the best political regime. However, not everyone sees Ratzinger as an ally of democracy. John Allen Jr., for example, claims that Ratzinger “believes that the best antidote to political totalitarianism is ecclesial totalitarianism.”⁹⁰ Allen’s claim exemplifies the false dualism I reject in this work. It is easy to show Ratzinger’s opposition to totalitarianism, and not very hard to uncover his hesitation about the possibility of “an ecclesial totalitarianism.”

86. Voegelin, *Political Religions*, 77.

87. Voegelin, *Political Religions*, 14.

88. Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 156.

89. Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 157. Giorgio Agamben coincides in the inescapability of the tension: “He [Jesus] – who has not come to judge the world but to save it – finds himself, perhaps precisely for this reason, having to respond in a trial, to submit to a judgment, which his alter ego, Pilate, in the end will not pronounce, cannot pronounce. Justice and salvation cannot be reconciled; every time, they return to mutually excluding and calling for each other” (G. Agamben, *Pilate and Jesus*, trans. Adam Kotsko [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013], 44).

90. John Allen, *Benedict XVI. A Biography* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 3.

Ratzinger rejects political theology on at least four grounds. First, he subscribes to Peterson's rejection of the idea of a Christian political theology.⁹¹ The possibility of political theology is also rejected in the New Testament: Ratzinger leans on the historian Martin Hengel, who contrasts the Jewish Zealot movement with the preaching of Jesus of Nazareth, affirming that "one could, like the Zealots, attempt to 'force' ... the imminent reign of God through militant action, with weapons in hand, or, conversely, to alleviate the enormous, concrete need, to bind up wounds instead of inflicting them. Jesus consistently chose the second way."⁹²

In the third place, he follows Voegelin's critique of gnosticism.⁹³ In opposition to the gnostic tenet that through the use and perfection of human knowledge we can establish a new order of being, Ratzinger claims that our "relationship to truth is first of all essentially receptive and not productive."⁹⁴ Gnosticism, on its part, represents a rejection of the *cosmos* and its God, "a radical form of protest against everything that up until then had seemed to be holy, good, and upright, and that was now exposed as a prison, which gnosis promised to show the way out of."⁹⁵

For Ratzinger, however, "neither reason nor faith ever promises us

91. "In the old Church the victory of belief in the Trinity over Monarchianism signified a victory over the political abuse of theology: the ecclesiastical belief in the Trinity shattered the politically usable molds, destroyed the potentialities of theology as political myth, and disowned the misuse of the Gospel to justify a political situation" (Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004], 170-171). See also Ratzinger, *The Unity of the Nations* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2015), 7, 103, 112; Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 58.

92. Martin Hengel, *Was Jesus a Revolutionist?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 20. "It is not unlikely that Jesus formulated his demand to forgive one's enemies and be ready to forgive in conscious contrast to that Zealot passion that so informed the leading intellectual and spiritual class of his nation" (Hengel, *Victory over Violence: Jesus and the Revolutionists* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973], 50).

93. According to the website *VoegelinView*, published by the Eric Voegelin Society, Ratzinger wrote to Voegelin in 1981, praising his study on gnosticism. The then cardinal confides: "Since I came across your small volume on *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* in 1959 I have been fascinated and inspired by your thought" ("Benedict and Voegelin," *VoegelinView*, February 13, 2013, <https://voegelinview.com/benedict-and-voegelin/> [accessed Dec. 5, 2017]). Cf. Ratzinger, *The Unity of the Nations*, 18n22.

94. Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism & Politics* (New York: Saint Paul Publications, 1988), 160.

95. Ratzinger, *The Unity of Nations*, 18-19.

that there will ever be a perfect world. It does not exist,”⁹⁶ and thus the gnostic project is condemned to fail. A fourth ground for rejecting political theology comes from Ratzinger’s Augustinianism.⁹⁷ He adopts Augustine’s doctrine of the two cities, the idea that, although mixed together here on Earth,⁹⁸ the two cities are distinguishable in their origins, their loves, and their *telos*. Happiness, for the citizens of the heavenly city – which is “true” happiness – is not attainable in this world, for “no one lives as he wishes unless he is happy, and... no one is happy unless he is righteous. Even the righteous man, however, will not live as he wishes unless he arrives at the state where he is wholly free from death, error and harm.”⁹⁹

Consequently, when we hubristically deceive ourselves into the belief that our sole efforts can change human nature¹⁰⁰ and thus “renew the face of Earth,”¹⁰¹ the illusion of an unbridled reason becomes potentially destructive. Politics, therefore, can’t aim at ultimate happiness, it cannot try to bring God’s kingdom to earth, to divinize its immanent form. Politics, as understood by Christianity, is an “exceptionally sober” human activity: “it must ensure peace at home and abroad.”¹⁰²

The definition of politics above is vague enough to allow a considerable variety of political regimes: it can range from Hobbes’ solution of an absolute sovereign that holds together the keys of the two cities, the sword and the staff, to Kant’s perpetual peace among republican governments. We need, therefore, to clarify what Ratzinger means. To do this, we need to understand the relation between faith and reason, in order to see how politics, which for Ratzinger is “the realm of reason,”¹⁰³ relates to faith and religion.

96. Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism & Politics*, 208.

97. Ratzinger, *Milestones: Memoirs 1927-1977* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 44.

98. Cf. Augustine, *The City of God* I:35.

99. Augustine, *The City of God* XIV:25.

100. The creation of an ideal society is impossible because human nature remains a constant over time: “Man, precisely as man remains the same both in primitive and in technologically developed situations. He does not stand on a higher level merely because he has learned to use more highly developed tools. Mankind beings anew in every single individual. This is why it is not possible for the definitely new, ideal society to exist” (Ratzinger, *Values in a Time of Upheaval* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006], 25). See also Ratzinger, *Fundamental Speeches from Five Decades* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), 149.

101. Psalm 104:30.

102. Ratzinger, *Values in a Time of Upheaval*, 22.

103. Ratzinger, *Values in a Time of Upheaval*, 24.

Christianity shook the Hellenistic world, presenting itself as a *scandal*. Paul's speech at the Areopagus (Acts 17:22-34) challenged not only traditional polytheism, it also claimed that God had come to earth, adopting the human nature, had been arrested, crucified, and had resurrected. Christianity understood itself from the beginning as a *rational* religion, a claim that is beautifully expressed in the introductory lines of John's gospel: God, the *logos*, became *sarx* and dwelled among human beings. In Christ, God's communication with human beings reached its fullness: Jesus made known God's name to the humankind (Jn 17:26).¹⁰⁴ That faith is reasonable means it is not mythical, that is, it is not a human product, but God's revelation to human beings. On the other hand, faith is not rational in the sense that God is cognoscible. God is the absolutely "Other,"¹⁰⁵ the being that is not graspable by the human mind. For that reason, Augustine's claim remains final: "We see that the world exists, whereas we believe that God exists."¹⁰⁶

The tension between faith and reason is reflected in the tension between the church and the state. The state acts in accordance with divine ordinance insofar as it "guarantees peace and the rule of law,"¹⁰⁷ irrespective of the personal beliefs or intentions of those in office; this "sober" definition entails a limitation on the state: "the refusal to adore the emperor and the refusal in general to worship the state are on the most fundamental level

104. For Ratzinger, this passage must be understood along with Exodus 3:13-14. Ratzinger explains: "All chapter 17 [of John's gospel] – the so-called 'high priestly prayer,' perhaps the heart of the whole Gospel – centers around the idea of 'Jesus as the revealer of the name of God' and thus assumes the position of New Testament counterpart to the story of the burning bush" (Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 132-133).

105. "[T]here is an infinite gulf between God and man... God is not just he who at present lies in fact outside the field of vision but could be seen if it were possible to go father; no, he is the being who stands essentially outside it, however far our field of vision may be extended" (Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 49-50).

106. Augustine, *The City of God* XI:4.

107. Ratzinger, *Values in a Time of Upheaval*, 20. This idea has Augustinian roots as well. Paul Weithman writes that, for Augustine, "the moral assessment of political authorities turns crucially on how they try to bring about earthly peace" (Weithman, "Augustine's Political Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, eds. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001], 244; see also Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Augustine," in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, eds. Peter Scott and William Cavanaugh [Malden: Blackwell, 2004], 40).

simply a rejection of the totalitarian state.”¹⁰⁸ A question immediately arises: Where does law come from? The answer, for Ratzinger, is that laws must reflect societies’ deepest convictions, its lifestyle and self-understanding.

Ratzinger focuses on democracy – which he deems “the most appropriate of all political models”¹⁰⁹ – where decision making is understood as a collaborative effort to shape the law. Democracy is, however, not perfect. He sees the main weakness of this political regime in what Alexis de Tocqueville described as the tyranny of majorities. Ratzinger’s solution to the tyranny of majorities is, consistently, a Tocquevillian one. Contemporary democracies, Ratzinger alerts us, are too invested in institutional design, displaying, on the other hand, “a complete oblivion of the second basic ingredient of political life, the *mores*,” which he understands not in terms of “*morality* but...*custom* or lifestyle.”¹¹⁰ The political community feeds off “utopia,” the reflection on the ideal city and its moral content. This symbiosis between politics and utopia must not forget that the human society will never be perfect and, for that reason, must always remain open to change and reform. This is true, moreover, because there is no single moral imperative that can be deemed definitive:

There is no single rational or ethical or religious “world formula” that could win acceptance by everyone and could then provide support for the whole. At any rate, such a formula is unattainable at present. This is why the so-called “world ethos” remains an abstraction.¹¹¹

Ratzinger rejects both relativism and authoritarianism. He emphatically claims that Christianity cannot be forced upon people. He quotes Origen: “Christ does not win victory over anyone who does not wish it. He conquers

108. Ratzinger, *Values in a Time of Upheaval*, 20.

109. Ratzinger, *Values in a Time of Upheaval*, 33.

110. Ratzinger, *Joseph Ratzinger in Communio*, Vol. I. (Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Group, 2010), 25. In my view, contemporary democracy is *not* oblivious of *mores*. The contrary seems true: liberal democracies invest a lot of resources to shape their citizens’ worldviews and lifestyles. See, for example, William Galston, “Defending Liberalism,” *The American Political Science Review* 76, no. 3 (1982): 627. Ratzinger’s worry can (and, in my view, should) be reformulated, in order to express that the liberal ethos is not the best one for a healthy democratic society.

111. Ratzinger, *Fundamental Speeches*, 42.

only by convincing, for he is the *Word* of God.”¹¹² This sentence, which reminds us of Revelation 3:20, “I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me,” is consistent both with the idea that the kingdom of God is otherworldly, and, consequently, with the necessary separation of church and state:

The state is entitled to be autonomous with respect to the Church, and the bishop must acknowledge that the state has its own reality and law. He avoids mixing faith and politics and serves the freedom of all by refusing to allow faith to be identified with a particular form of politics. The Gospel prescribes certain truths and values to politics, but it does not respond to concrete questions concerning particular political and economic issues. This “autonomy of earthly things,” of which the Second Vatican Council spoke, must be respected.¹¹³

Ratzinger is aware of the dangers of the marriage of faith and a particular social design, as was the case of Christendom,¹¹⁴ and for that reason is committed to a healthy separation of orders. However, this separation cannot imply a complete divorce. At least two reasons can be adduced: first of all, if we assume that truth – i.e., truth about the meaning of life, which necessarily includes *communal life* – is not a human possession, but is received as a gift in revelation, then it follows that the state is obliged to listen and learn from the great religious traditions;¹¹⁵ secondly, even if we adopt a pluralist view of human communities, we still can defend the duty of the churches to actively participate in the public sphere and offer arguments to inform their moral positions. Ratzinger’s notion of the state

112. Ratzinger, *Values in a Time of Upheaval*, 52.

113. Ratzinger, *Called to Communion: Understanding the Church Today* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 101.

114. “The use of the State by the Church for its own purposes, climaxing in the Middle Ages and in absolutist Spain of the early modern era, has since Constantine been one of the most serious liabilities of the Church, and any historically minded person is inescapably aware of this. In its thinking, the Church has stubbornly confused faith in the absolute truth manifest in Christ with insistence on an absolute secular status for the institutional Church. Another characteristic deeply imbedded in the Catholic mentality is the inability to see beyond the Catholic faith, the inability to see the other person’s viewpoint” (Ratzinger, *Theological Highlights of Vatican II* [Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1966], 144).

115. Ratzinger, *Fundamental Speeches*, 43.

and, particularly, of democracy, is more welcoming to modernity than, for example, Voegelin's.

What is, finally, Ratzinger's position about the Church? Is he really advocating an "ecclesiastical totalitarianism"? Here we see Ratzinger leaning again on Peterson.¹¹⁶ His understanding of the Church was shaped by the latter's article *The Church*, where Peterson deals with Alfred Loisy's dictum: "Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom; what came was the Church." According to Peterson, the Church's existence is possible only as the Church of *Gentiles*. Jesus sent his apostles to every corner of the world, Peterson argues, *because* the chosen people rejected him. Paul deems Israel's conversion as an eschatological event: "a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles come in, and so all Israel will be saved" (Rom 11:25-26). The Church exists between Pentecost and the Parousia, she is *not* the kingdom, but they are not in opposition to each other.

Ratzinger borrows an image used by the Church Fathers to conceptualize the relationship between God and the Church. The Church resembles the moon, whose light is not hers, but comes from the sun. The moon "represents the earthly world, the world that is characterized by receptivity and neediness."¹¹⁷ Therefore, the Church "receives light from the true *Helios*, Christ."¹¹⁸ Ratzinger reacts against a feverish demand for "reform" in the Church, a yearning that is often driven by a falsification of what she is. We are tempted to see her only as a structure, an institution, that can be changed to our likes. In opposition to this all-too-human understanding of the Church as a flexible human institution,¹¹⁹ Ratzinger insists that, notwithstanding the many scandals inside the Church, the multiple ways in which she has betrayed the message of Christ, falling short from her mission, the Church of Jesus "lives behind 'our church.'"¹²⁰

116. Ratzinger, *Called to Communion*, 21n6.

117. Ratzinger, *Fundamental Speeches*, 142.

118. Ratzinger, *Fundamental Speeches*, 143.

119. "His Church has been replaced by our Church and, thus, by many churches, since everyone has his own. The churches have become *our* undertakings, of which we are either proud or ashamed" (Ratzinger, *Fundamental Speeches*, 145). Elsewhere, Ratzinger contends: "A church based on human resolutions becomes a merely human church. It is reduced to the level of the makeable, of the obvious, of opinion. Opinion replaces faith" (Ratzinger, *Called to Communion*, 139).

120. Ratzinger, *Fundamental Speeches*, 146.

An “ecclesiastical totalitarianism” betrays the Church founded by Jesus, to say nothing of betraying the Scriptures, which reject oppression and commend conviction. The Church’s obligation is to preserve herself as the recipient of revelation, as its guardian. At the same time, she must recognize the human element in her, which demands of her to be constantly purified by reason. Just as reason, when it turns pathological – e.g. the atomic bomb, totalitarianism, science understood as completely independent of moral constraints – is in need to listen the great religious traditions, the pathologies of faith – e.g., fundamentalism, oppression, immanentization of eschatology – need the salutary check of reason.

V

In this article I have tried to show that a stable and consistent tradition of non-liberal, antitotalitarian political thought can be read in the works of Erik Peterson, Eric Voegelin, and Joseph Ratzinger. They all reject political theology if we understood the concept as the attempt to coat a political regime with a theological narrative, bringing down the eschatological distance between God’s Kingdom and the human *polity*. This strategy finds its extreme incarnation in totalitarian regimes. The three thinkers are critical, in different degrees, of modernity. Finally, none of them can be counted as part of mainstream liberalism. Voegelin and Ratzinger question the very possibility of a clean-cut distinction between the spheres of the state and church. Although both alert against the conflation of the two orders, they recognize that the relationships between faith and reason, politics and religion, church and state, are complex. Moreover, for both, the pathologies of reason – which arise every time reason dreams with total autonomy – call for religion as a salutary check.

I have tried to show the dangers of putting theology in the service of politics *and vice versa*. It is a bad idea to try to solve the tensions between faith and reason, immanence and transcendence, human justice and salvation, instead of assuming these tensions as the inescapable reality of existence, as the permanent questions of human life.

This is not, to be sure, the first attempt to denounce the imposition of the liberal framework onto theology, that is, to free the latter from the former’s hegemony. One of the most influential non-liberal political theologies is that of Radical Orthodoxy, a theological sensibility that claims that, contrary to the dominant story that sees secularization as the progressive liberation of

reason from religious superstition and prejudice, secularity was *invented* and, moreover, that its origins must be traced to theology. Modern secularity was made possible by a move from an ontology of participation (in which the being of creatures is given by their analogy with their Creator) to a univocal ontology where Being “becomes a category that is unhooked from participation in God and is a more neutral or abstract qualifier that is applied to God and creatures in the same way.”¹²¹

According to John Milbank, liberalism creates an artificial subject, whose nature is defined not by any goal or end, but by pure volition, by the “will to will.”¹²² This view of human nature is incapable of fostering friendship or community – or even, for that matter, of upholding human rights against the recrudescence of intolerant religions, for this is “rather a problem that liberalism tends to engender.”¹²³ The liberal state can only proclaim violence as its principle of order.

Radical Orthodoxy opposes the Christian *polis* to state politics. Mary Doaks claims that the solution Milbank offers, while accepting the need for the state as a necessary evil, is “not to engage and transform the state, but to build up the church as the only true polis with a genuine justice and peace that cannot be found elsewhere.”¹²⁴ William Cavanaugh goes beyond Milbank; he utterly rejects the state as an evil, and proposes instead a “Christian anarchism,” a government without state in which “multiple associations and communities work things out among themselves without any central or sovereign authority to enforce laws regulating their interrelationship.”¹²⁵

Doaks is right in stressing the incompatibility of these political theologies. Non-liberal Catholicism provides a different solution to the political problem: it acknowledges that church and state work on different levels of human existence, denounces the immanentization of God’s kingdom as foreign to Christian doctrine, but also opposes the seclusion of religion as a private matter. It defends strong claims about human nature, about politics

121. James K.A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 97.

122. John Milbank, “The Gift of Ruling,” in *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader*, eds. John Milbank and Simon Oliver (New York: Routledge, 2009), 338.

123. Milbank, “The Gift of Ruling,” 356.

124. Mary Doaks, “The Politics of Radical Orthodoxy: A Catholic Critique,” *Theological Studies* 68 (2007): 375.

125. Doaks, “The Politics of Radical Orthodoxy,” 379.

and its relationship with faith, religion and the churches, about human goals, and the fact, tragic or liberating, that perfection, either individual or social, is not achievable in this life, that we are, in the end, condemned to be always a work in progress.

