

Introduction

At the time of his death fifty years ago, the name and work of Erik Peterson (1890–1960) were known primarily to two sets of readers: an aging cohort of German Catholic intellectuals who remembered him as one of a number of brilliant Protestant and Jewish converts to Catholicism in the postwar turbulence of the Weimar Republic; and academic experts in the study of Christian origins. The former group would have been mainly acquainted with essays and articles written for a general readership and published in leading Catholic publications like *Hochland*. The latter group would have included specialists in the study of liturgy, asceticism, and apocryphal Jewish and Christian literature.

Within a few years of his death, a third set of readers emerged in the heated political climate of the 1960s and 1970s. They knew Peterson through *Monotheismus als politisches Problem*, his classic study of ancient political theology. Its rejection of “any such thing as a Christian political theology” was a frequent point of departure for Christian theologians who wanted to think that Peterson’s argument applied to someone else’s political theology but not theirs.

There probably wasn’t much overlap among these groups. Someone who happened upon collections of his papers republished in the 1950s might not have realized that the author of the theological essays in *Theologische Traktate* was the same person who wrote the erudite technical articles in *Frühkirche, Judentum, und Gnosis*.¹ Peterson’s eclectic readership reflected fractures that marked his life and thought from beginning to end.

Peterson was born into a secularized Lutheran family in Hamburg, but a conversion experience at the age of twenty brought him into the Pietist revival movement that flourished in the pre–World War I generation of German university students. In midlife, after years of agonized hesitation, he converted to Roman Catholicism, attracted by its authori-

tarian dimensions: the foundation in dogma and tradition, the centrality of canon law and magisterial authority, and even the Church's one-time reliance on state power to enforce orthodoxy and repress heresy. Then, after living in Rome as an underappreciated lay scholar in a Church where theology was a clerical enterprise, he became openly disenchanted with the bureaucratic centralization of the modern papacy. The man who in 1919, sickened by the bellicose nationalism of churches and theologians, wrote a brilliant satire of militarized Christianity ("The Heaven of the Military Garrison Chaplain"), also defended the providential conversion of the Roman Empire. A lifelong foe of modern Christianity's *embourgeoisement* who scorned not only liberal democracy but also pacifism and socialism, he could still say at the age of fifty-eight that the sight of Christian mediocrity was enough to induce "an existential heart attack."² Although he had attacked Karl Barth's dialectical theology as a Protestant theologian, because it did not recognize Church and dogma, as a Catholic, Peterson wrote little that looked like dogmatic theology. His theological essays and historical scholarship were devoted to asceticism, celibacy, and martyrdom, but at age forty-three, he married a young Italian woman and fathered five children. Barth, who knew Peterson well, rightly foresaw that he would always be a *Randgestalt*, a person on the margin.³

Theologische Traktate continued to find readers long after it fell out of print. That was partly due to the revival of political theology in the 1960s. More recently there has been the outpouring of scholarship on Carl Schmitt, with whom Erik Peterson formed an intense friendship, which profoundly shaped both men's thinking. Jacob Taubes, who made perceptive observations about the Peterson-Schmitt relationship, and who had his own contorted dealings with Schmitt, is said to have prized his copy of *Theologische Traktate* and to have carried it everywhere, along with Walter Benjamin's works.⁴ Peterson and Benjamin are a suggestive pairing. In his book *Beyond the Border: The German-Jewish Legacy Abroad* (2007), Stephen Aschheim refers to the "iconising" of the generation of German-Jewish intellectuals that included Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, Gershom Scholem, Theodore Adorno, and others. All of them hunted for a lost transcendence that they could no longer believe in. Erik Peterson, though an ardent Christian, had something in common with their restless dissatisfaction with the world as it is. Like Scholem and Benjamin, in particular, he was launched on a search in ancient texts for a world that was not so much lost as still beyond us.

Theologische Traktate has always had Protestant readers, especially those who saw the same failings in Protestantism that he did.⁵ Roman Catholics respected his learning and were pleased to have won such a prestigious convert, but were not always comfortable with Peterson's blunt judgments, his rigorous historical scholarship, and his deep sense of eschatological provisionality. Nevertheless, he found numerous sympathetic readers, not just in Germany but also, remarkably for the interwar and postwar generations, in France as well. Theologians like Yves Congar and Jean Daniélou saw that he could be a guide for the "return to the sources" animating theological renewal prior to the Second Vatican Council. Though he died before the council and would probably have had mixed views of its work and of its implementation, his legacy may yet offer a means for speaking to—and against the grain of—some of the entrenched divisions in the post-conciliar Church.

The time thus seems ripe for an English language version of *Theologische Traktate*. Except for a 1964 translation of *Das Buch von den Engeln* under the title *The Angels and the Liturgy: The Status and Significance of the Holy Angels in Worship*, now out of print, and a translation of Peterson's correspondence with Adolf von Harnack, none of the other pieces in this collection has previously appeared in English. French and Italian editions are also now out or about to appear. We have not only the magnificent resource of Barbara Nichtweiß's intellectual biography of Peterson at our disposal, but also the collected edition of his previously published and also unpublished works, *Ausgewählte Schriften*, which is now appearing under the energetic editorship of Nichtweiß and a team.⁶

Education and Career

After completing his youthful education in Hamburg, Peterson studied "Evangelical" theology (in German *evangelisch* simply means Protestant or Lutheran, not "born again") at several German universities in the years leading up to World War I. His studies were interrupted by military service in October 1914, though he was discharged just three months later after a total breakdown.⁷ Following his recovery, he returned to academic work in the fall of 1916 at the University of Göttingen, where he worked on his dissertation with the Church historian Nathanael Bonwetsch, a respected patristics scholar who shared Peterson's Pietist convictions. But he

did not avoid liberal theologians on principle, enlisting Walter Bauer, for example, as a dissertation reader. Peterson was also drawn to the Göttingen faculty's celebrated "History of Religions School" of interpretation, which treated early Christianity, in rigorously historicist and comparative fashion, as one among many ancient religions. He was especially impressed with Richard Reitzenstein, the school's leading light at that time, whose ideas and methods exerted a major influence on Peterson's dissertation. His preference for positivist or empirical scholarly methods sat rather awkwardly with some of his deeper theological commitments. They are another indication of the splits referred to above.

His dissertation, "*Heis Theos*": *Epigraphische, formgeschichtliche und religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen* ("Heis Theos" [One God]: Epigraphic, Form-Historical, and Religious-Historical Investigations), was completed in 1920 and eventually published in revised and expanded form in 1926.⁸ It studied the "One God" formula in late ancient inscriptions and texts. Peterson concluded that the formula, which was known to have apotropaic functions, originated in the shouted acclamations used in political assemblies, from which secular usage a variety of ancient religions then adapted them, for exorcism formulas, liturgical speech, and conciliar practices. The dissertation, a vintage product of the History of Religions school, was notably non-theological in its comparative and positivist methods. The reliance on key words would remain a feature of Peterson's scholarship. It left its mark on *Monotheismus als politisches Problem* and led to the near-legendary collection of citation cards that in his biographer's estimate had swollen to the hundreds of thousands by the time he died.⁹ The prominent role Peterson gave to popular acclamations anticipated—if it was not already a product of—the kinship he would enjoy with Carl Schmitt when the two were colleagues at Bonn.¹⁰

Heis Theos launched Peterson's academic career. Doubling as his *Habilitation*, it earned him a post at Göttingen, where he served from 1920 until 1924 as *Privatdozent* for Church history, with lecturing responsibility also for Christian archaeology. Of prime importance during Peterson's four years at Göttingen was the contentious friendship he formed with Karl Barth, who got his first university appointment a year after Peterson's arrival. Besides their common debt to Søren Kierkegaard, they shared the marginality of those at the lower rungs of the professorial ladder, a marginality that in both cases was heightened by polemical temperament, high intelligence, and

grandiose sense of mission. Initially, Barth was the junior partner. Peterson's learning impressed him, whereas he himself, fresh from his years as a pastor, was scrambling to catch up to the university norm. But the positions would soon be reversed as Barth's star rose in the theological firmament.

In the winter semester of 1924, Peterson was called to Bonn as ordinary professor of Church history and the New Testament. He stayed there five years, for the last of which he was also dean of the Faculty of Evangelical Theology. During that time his long-standing reservations about Protestant Christianity came to a head and impelled him to leave the Evangelical Church and become a Roman Catholic. In October 1929, he requested leave from his position and the following March, he petitioned for emeritus status. Later that year (October 1930), he was given a position as *Honorarprofessur* in the Philosophy Faculty, but he took repeated leaves. He lost the position in 1936, and it would not be restored to him until after the war. In a reprise of what happened with Barth at Göttingen, at Bonn, Peterson discovered another intimate friend with whom his intellectual and religious development would be entangled, though this time a Catholic and a non-theologian, Carl Schmitt, professor of law at Bonn from 1922 until his move to Berlin in 1928: "the only reasonable man in Bonn."¹¹ Peterson's Bonn years were the most settled period of his life. He enjoyed a rich social life, mostly with Catholic colleagues rather than with fellow Protestants. None of those Catholic friendships approached the intellectual depth and intensity of the bond he formed with Schmitt, however. The influences were reciprocal—Peterson's biographer speaks of a "permeable intellectual membrane" between them—and extended to every aspect of Peterson's thinking on the public character (*Öffentlichkeit*) of Christianity. Peterson even stood as a witness to Schmitt's second (and non-canonical) marriage in 1926, and later lobbied on his behalf for an annulment. The friendship deteriorated and never really recovered after Schmitt's dalliance with the Nazi dictatorship.

Peterson was received into the Catholic Church at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome on December 22–23, 1930. His conversion to Catholicism meant an abrupt derailment of his academic career. Despite the efforts of his friends in Germany, he was not able to find another university appointment. For a while he considered becoming a Catholic priest, and he actually began a fast-track seminary program in Munich. That plan apparently foundered, because in the spring of 1932 he broke off his priestly studies. For several

years after his conversion, he alternated between living in Munich and in Rome. During one of his Roman stays, he met and fell in love with a young Italian woman named Matilde Bertini (1910–1993), the daughter of an editor of *L'Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican newspaper. His biographer reports that upon meeting her, he was so swept away that his other plans evaporated. They were married on June 1, 1933. Five children quickly followed.

In Rome, Peterson experienced great frustration in trying to find an academic position appropriate to his stature. The struggle to support his family left him with a bitterness he did not try to hide. Anti-clericalism, he once said to his Benedictine friend Thomas Michels, was more likely to come from moral than from dogmatic objections. From 1937 on, he had a precarious hold on a lectureship in the Papal Institute for Christian Archaeology, finally upgraded ten years later to an Extraordinary professorship. In 1956, he received a *nihil obstat* to be an Ordinary professor at the Institute, but the appointment was never realized. By that time his energies were sapped, and he was in declining health. He died on October 26, 1960, in a Hamburg hospital, after a stroke following surgery for prostate cancer. He had wished to be buried in Rome in the Campo Santo Teutonico, the venerable German cemetery adjacent to Vatican City. In a final and emblematic snub, the German religious confraternity to which he belonged denied burial rights to the family.¹² Instead he was interred in the city cemetery of Rome, in the family plot of his Italian in-laws.

Writings

Heis Theos is Peterson's only real book-length publication, and even it gives the impression of a mosaic of specialized studies. His published work consisted mostly of essays in general-interest journals, such as *Hochland*, and specialized studies on aspects of ancient Christianity and related subjects, dense with footnotes and untranslated Greek and Latin.¹³ Among possible reasons for this rather crabbed production, two stand out. One is Peterson's lifelong preference for close, even minute study of individual texts. He was by nature skeptical of big-picture syntheses and doubted whether "history" in the sense of a coherent narrative was even possible. This stemmed from his acute sensitivity to the eschatological, and also from habitual intellectual restraint. His avowal of dogmatic theology did not include theological system-building, which in his view was a very different

enterprise. “Discontinuity” is a theme in his diaries from early manhood to old age: “We know in part’ [1 Cor. 13] means that there is no ‘systematic’ or even comprehensive knowledge of God and his mysteries.”¹⁴ In today’s jargon, we would say he did not believe in grand narratives.

The other explanation for his reticence is circumstantial. In mid-career, he was forced to become a virtual itinerant. And the Church he joined was not very interested in fresh theological initiatives from a layman, and a convert to boot. His precarious status in Rome did not recommend boldness. Whatever other benefits he got from becoming a Catholic, encouragement and stimulation as a writer weren’t among them. The unpublished writings that are now appearing enrich our appreciation of his achievement. But they mostly come from his university lectures on the New Testament, Christian origins, Church history, and related subjects. They precede his conversion. It is true that most of the articles translated here were first published in the 1930s. But even they owe a good deal of their substance to work he did in the previous decade. When they were collected and republished in 1951, Peterson had contentious negotiations with the publisher, Kösel Verlag, over how to characterize the author’s relationship to his Protestant past. By mutual agreement, the following carefully worded preface was added:

With the consent of the author, we present a collection of some important writings and essays of Erik Peterson’s, which were previously published in various places and for the most part are now out of print. No changes in the texts were envisioned, although the author today takes a critical view of many of his earlier writings, especially the articles “What Is Theology?” and “The Church,” which both stem from his Protestant period. We believe that the writings collected here still have a significant role to play in contemporary theological discussion, and that reprinting them, in individually unchanged form, therefore appears justified.

The essays are presented here in the chronological order of their original publication, covering slightly more than a decade (1925–1937).¹⁵ They make an excellent composite portrait of Peterson’s thinking during the decisive years of his career. Readers whose main interest is in *Monotheismus als politisches Problem* (translated here as “Monotheism as a Political Problem: A Contribution to the History of Political Theology in the Roman Empire”), and who are otherwise unfamiliar with Peterson will find the other papers illuminating in the way they fill out the political dimension of his theology, for his celebrated repudiation of “any such thing as a Chris-

tian political theology” was in no way a denial of the political character of the Church and of Christianity.

“What Is Theology?” (1925)

The essay *Was ist Theologie?* is unique in *Theologische Traktate* in being framed exclusively in Protestant terms.¹⁶ The vocabulary, the issues, and the protagonists all belong to the years when the dialectical theology of Karl Barth and his allies was in the ascendant. But differences in the movement were already starting to emerge. Peterson recognized—even before the principals themselves were fully aware of it—that Barth and the New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann disagreed about the place that philosophy should play in theology. In this sharply worded, controversial piece, Peterson attacked the “dialectical” method by denying that it could be called knowledge at all.¹⁷ True theological knowledge depended on the Incarnation, not as a paradox, but as a fleshly and hence partially knowable reality. The claims to “concreteness” actually avoided the concrete obedience that a concrete revelation should claim: “Dialectical reference to God leads to the non-binding character of a mythical narrative but not to theology, for which obedience is required.” The description of dogma as the *Elongatur*, or extension, of the revelation of the Logos pointed both to Peterson’s concern for the objectivity of revelation and to the insight that the sacraments as well were such an extension. As such they imposed “a positive legal claim of God . . . which concretely touches every one of us”—an assertion whose juridical and coercive implications he did not shrink from endorsing, to the dismay of readers then and now.

*Correspondence with Adolf von Harnack (1928–1929)
and an Epilogue (1932)*

In the summer of 1928, Peterson exchanged a series of letters with the Church historian Adolf von Harnack, the aging patriarch of liberal Protestantism.¹⁸ The subject was Harnack’s recent assertion that the apostolic teaching office had relativized the authority of Scripture and thereby given “biblicism” a healthy and needed corrective. That claim subverted a basic axiom of traditional Protestantism, the sole sufficiency of Scripture (*sola Scriptura*). Peterson endorsed Harnack’s thesis in order to illuminate the

crisis that, he believed, the constitution of the Weimar Republic posed for traditional Protestantism. The Weimar Constitution derived sovereignty not from God but from the people (Art. 1), a principle that contradicted the biblical sanction for the state: “the powers that be are ordained of God” (Rom. 13:1). The abdication of the German princes deprived the provincial Protestant churches of the civil authorities who had been their traditional governors (*summi episcopi*, “chief overseers”) ever since the Reformation. This reopened the question of authority in the Church. While the new constitution preserved many features of state support for the established provincial churches, it offered similar support to every denomination and even to non-religious clubs or associations devoted to a particular worldview. The effect was to undercut the established churches’ privileged and public identification with the state and the nation. At the same time, the prestige of theology in the universities had declined since the war. Among theologians themselves, the previously dominant liberal theology of the prewar period was being subjected to savage critique by the Barthian insurgency.

Two years after Harnack’s death, Peterson, by then a Catholic, secured his widow’s permission to publish the letters, with an epilogue as commentary.¹⁹ In his article Peterson asserted that the new situation deprived Christianity of its public character (*Öffentlichkeit*, the leitmotif of *Theologische Traktate*). The Church was reduced to being merely one voluntary society among others, while its dogmas were being dissolved by rationalism, “mysticism” both spiritual and secular, and social activism. Barth’s dialectical theology was only a pretend solution, because it failed to grant the Church its proper authority. In a letter to Barth, Peterson described his epilogue to the correspondence as an “indirect communication” (in the Kierkegaardian sense) of some of the reasons for his conversion. He compared his path to Cardinal Newman’s, in that he had taken “the indirect way of the ‘Difficulties of Protestantism’ [quoted in English],” that is, through the weaknesses of Protestantism’s own presuppositions.²⁰

“The Church” (1928–1929)

This short, programmatic article originated as a lecture Peterson gave in the Netherlands in the fall of 1928. It was an intentional bookend to the correspondence with Harnack, for whom he said he had written it.²¹

But he certainly had Karl Barth in mind as well, for “The Church” served equally well as a sequel to “What Is Theology?”²²

“The Church” marked a decisive turning point in Peterson’s life and career and will therefore receive a commentary out of proportion to its brevity. Not only did it signal unambiguously to Protestants that its author was en route to Rome, but it had the simultaneous, if unintended, effect of unsettling Catholics as well. The essay took as its point of departure Alfred Loisy’s celebrated dictum: “Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom, and it was the Church that came.” That was the bomb that a generation ago had set off the Modernist crisis in the Catholic Church, with Loisy’s excommunication as one of its consequences. In 1902, in his brilliant little book *L’Évangile et l’Église* (The Gospel and the Church), Loisy, then a Catholic priest and a New Testament scholar, had defended the integrity of the Church’s tradition against Harnack’s historical critique. Whereas Harnack had tried to detach Jesus from the later beliefs and practices of the early Christian Church, Loisy turned Harnack’s developmental critique on its head. Appealing to Cardinal Newman’s theory of the development of doctrine, Loisy proposed that the true meaning of the Christian revelation could only be grasped in the light of its full development, just as the meaning of the seed could only be grasped once it had grown into a mature tree.²³ Harnack’s “primitivism” privileged origins in a classically Protestant way. But in seeking to free the historical “kernel” of the true message of Jesus from the husk of ecclesiastical tradition, Harnack failed to see that there was no other historical access to Jesus except *through* the tradition, which could not simply be peeled away as an accretion. “Whatever we think, theologically, of tradition, whether we trust it or regard it with suspicion, we know Christ only by the tradition, across the tradition, and in the tradition of the primitive Christians,” Loisy asserted.²⁴ Loisy identified the true message of Jesus as the proclamation of the Kingdom to Israel; Jesus did not in any literal sense found the Church, which had originated after Easter with the faith in the Resurrection.

Modern accounts of this thesis sometimes overlook the fact that Loisy considered it to be a legitimate and necessary development of Jesus’ message, not a distortion. But after his excommunication in 1908, Loisy’s apologetic came to be regarded in retrospect as a Trojan horse for Modernism. The 1907 papal decree *Lamentabili* condemned as a Modernist error the thesis that “It was foreign to the mind of Christ to establish the Church

as a society that would last on earth throughout the long duration of the ages; but rather that it was in the mind of Christ that the kingdom of heaven together with the end of the world would come soon.”²⁵

Given this background it is not surprising that Peterson’s essay aroused suspicion among some Catholic theologians and churchmen.²⁶ Even an early admirer and sponsor like Jacques Maritain had reservations. Yves Congar tried for years to get a French translation authorized; none appeared until 1953. His advocacy was eventually vindicated by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI), who in 1991 acknowledged that Peterson was “the first . . . to adopt [Loisy’s thesis] and take it in a Catholic direction.”²⁷ At the time, however, critics were troubled by the very use of historical-critical methods on such a sensitive dogmatic subject as Jesus’ foundation of the Church. Peterson frankly admitted there was no direct and immediate connection between Jesus and the Church, its offices, and its sacraments, though the purpose of his argument was to explain that this did not mean there had to be a separation or a gap between them.

He was not unaware of the misgivings. In the summer of 1930, he consulted with Catholic acquaintances in Rome about the precise meaning of the proposition “Jesus Christus instituit ecclesiam” (Jesus Christ founded a/the church). In a letter to Carl Schmitt, he reported the reassurance which he had received from Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, “the most famous Roman theologian”: “It is supposed to mean: Jesus Christ had the intention that there should be a Church. It is not supposed to mean that Christ founded an association with the pope as its chairman.”²⁸ The same letter to Schmitt mentioned the possibility of a book on the Church. Though he worked on it on and off for six years, the book never appeared, perhaps because Peterson became skittish about slipping on the “slick ice” of Catholic theology. He subsequently avoided such dangerous dogmatic terrain.²⁹ Despite hints that he should do so,³⁰ however, he never changed what he had written in “The Church,” saying only that he had used “a formulation that admittedly lent itself to various misunderstandings.”³¹

There was also uneasiness about the interpretation Peterson gave to the Jewish people’s rejection of Jesus.³² Some dogmatic theologians objected to seeming to treat the Church, and even the Crucifixion, as historical contingencies rather than necessary and intended instruments in God’s salvific plan. And there was criticism about the distinction Peterson made between the Church and the Kingdom of God. The distinction was never-

theless crucial to his argument, which posited that the continuity between the two lay in the persons of the Twelve, called by Jesus in the flesh to be the nucleus of a restored Israel, and called by the risen Christ and the Spirit to be the Twelve Apostles.

Today we would say that a greater problem has to do, not with what Peterson said about Jesus or the Church, but what he said about Judaism. In "The Church," the sharp cleavage between Jesus' public ministry and his risen state (to use Christian theological language) at least had the merit of recognizing frankly that his ministry, and that of the Twelve, was indeed in the first instance to Israel. The problem lay with the absoluteness of the cleavage, which consigned Jewish Christianity, and apparently everything having to do with primitive Christianity's Semitic origins, to historical desuetude and divine cancellation. In his later career, to be sure, Peterson's perspective changed, and Jewish Christianity became one of his favorite areas of research.³³

The other notable feature of "The Church" was its emphasis on the political aspect of the Church as an *ekklēsia*, a self-designation that Peterson insisted should be understood in the first instance as the citizen assembly of the Hellenistic polis (rather than as the Septuagint's equivalent for the *qahal*, the religious congregation, of the Hebrew Bible). The assembly was empowered to make binding decrees, which the people endorsed by acclamation. This stress on decision-making capability is certainly an echo of Peterson's intellectual fraternizing with Carl Schmitt, but it is more than just that: it goes to the heart of his sense of the Church as a quasi-political reality:

True, the Church is not the Kingdom. But something of the Kingdom clings to the Church, both of the political desire of the Jews for the Kingdom of God, as well as of the claim to sovereignty of "the Twelve" in the Kingdom of God. It is true, to be sure, that a certain ambiguity attaches to the Church. She is not in a univocal sense a religious-political entity such as was the messianic Kingdom of the Jews. 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."

"The Church from Jews and Gentiles" (1933)

Die Kirche aus Juden und Heiden ("The Church from Jews and Gentiles") was Peterson's first separate publication as a Catholic.³⁴ He dedicated it to "the Roman Church, in which the blessed apostles Peter and Paul

confirmed the calling of all, both from the Jews and from the Gentiles, by the shedding of their blood.”³⁵ His biographer says it was intended to advance theses first launched in “The Church” and to deflect criticisms from the Protestant side that he was prone to a “subjective Romanticism.”³⁶ It originated as three lectures given in Salzburg in the summer of 1932, which were adapted from Peterson’s unpublished university lectures on Paul’s letter to the Romans,³⁷ chapters 9 to 11, in which Paul considers God’s election of Israel and the calling of the Gentiles.

With anti-Semitism on the rise, the topic was controversial. A year later, Peterson would publish a long article in *Hochland* on the new national Protestant Church that had come into being in the wake of the Third Reich.³⁸ The article deplored the new Church’s cooptation by the radically anti-Semitic *Deutsche Christen* (German Christians), who were protesting the Church’s Jewish heritage and clamoring for the Church to recognize race and nationhood as orders of creation. At Salzburg, Peterson argued forcefully that “Israel alone is and remains the chosen people.” No other people could seek to play that role. At the same time, because election was now understood in what Peterson called “eschatological time” and not secular time, “Jews and Gentiles belong to the chosen Israel, as it is now constituted in the Ekklesia.”

To a certain extent, then, “The Church from Jews and Gentiles” may be admired for defending the integrity of the revelation to Israel, and that is how some have regarded it.³⁹ A less complimentary reading will note unhappy features of its attitude to Judaism and to Jews. In this piece and in others in *Theologische Traktate*, Peterson firmly endorsed the traditional representation of the *synagoga caeca*, the blindfolded synagogue, which failed to recognize Jesus as Messiah. In his view, “the Jewish problem” (*sic*) was essentially *theological* and in the hands of God, and was therefore incapable of political and social solution, either by the neutrality of the liberal state or by *völkisch* racial theory. Anti-Jewish stereotypes crop up here and there. That they were standard fare for the time doesn’t make references to Jewish wealth, to “a certain hysteria [that] marks the metaphysical character of the Jewish people,” to “the famous Jewish cleverness,” and so on, any less obnoxious. An article or monograph on Peterson’s theology of Judaism would be a welcome contribution.⁴⁰ It would have to distinguish carefully between his specifically theological judgments, his historical scholarship, and his personal prejudices.

"Monotheism as a Political Problem" (1935)

The landmark treatise *Monotheismus als politisches Problem: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der politischen Theologie im Imperium Romanum*, a synthesis of two earlier articles, has had an immense and controversial influence.⁴¹ All we can do here is summarize Peterson's purpose, mention some objections to his thesis, and provide some context on his relationship with Carl Schmitt.⁴²

As is well known, Peterson posited the existence of a widespread ancient political theology that legitimated monarchical rule on earth by the cosmic rule of one god in heaven. His thesis was that the triumph of orthodox Nicene Trinitarian theology over Arian heresy (which subordinated the Son to the Father) spared Christianity from subjugation to such a political theology by making its ideological presupposition impossible. Not only that, Peterson went on to say, it thereby established that *any* such thing as a Christian political theology was impossible. (It is sometimes forgotten that his proof actually had two components, the other being the victory of Augustine's eschatology of deferral over the readiness of other Christians, such as Eusebius of Caesarea, to see the Constantinian settlement as a harbinger of the peace of the messianic age.)

Readers unfamiliar with *Monotheismus als politisches Problem* ("Monotheism as a Political Problem") may be surprised to find themselves mired in chains of quotations from ancient authors with whom they have little acquaintance. Peterson says nothing at all about the present, aside from a final note. But contemporaries recognized that this short book was "a warning against a new Arianism," as his friend Alois Dempf said in his eulogy for Peterson.⁴³ "Arianism" was a cipher for the political theology of Christians who had been bewitched by Hitler and his regime in its early days. It was certainly his intention, Peterson later said, "to take a poke at the *Reichstheologie*" (theology of the Reich), particularly at the version being propagated by conservative Catholics, some of whom were his friends, for whom National Socialism (briefly) held out the hope of turning back the tide of secularization.⁴⁴ Peterson shared many of their assumptions about the right ordering of society and state, but recognized immediately that the Nazis were mortal enemies and could not be tamed.

Objections to the thesis are many. Some appeal to matters of fact, such as the long history of the Christian Church's establishment in the

Roman Empire, in which it was often a creature of the government. (A rebuttal might point out that Peterson was talking about *theology*, not about history.) Others hold that the thesis dictated the evidence. They think that Peterson's construction of Arianism was more fiction than historical reality, a template on which to project contemporary conflicts. He has met even stronger resistance to his broader rejection of Christian political theology altogether. One school of critics has objected that Peterson limited himself to conservative political theology that legitimated the existing order, while ignoring other political theologies that served a critical function. That was a favorite theme of leftist-oriented political theologians in the 1960s and 1970s. A different criticism, more historicist in nature, denied that a single case study of a particular time and place could possibly have the universal validity Peterson claimed.

That last critique came from none other than his close friend Carl Schmitt, who is referred to by name in the monograph's final note, which credits Schmitt's 1922 book *Politische Theologie* for introducing the concept into modern discourse. The note is perhaps intentionally vague as to whether Peterson approved of Schmitt's work. Schmitt thought he did not and much resented it, though he said nothing about it until ten years after Peterson's death, when he published a sequel to *Politische Theologie* that was aimed directly at *Monotheismus als politisches Problem*.⁴⁵ He argued that the definition of what was political and what was not was itself an inescapably *political* decision, the argument that he had put forward long before in his book *Der Begriff des Politischen* (1927; translated as *The Concept of the Political*). There was no theological sanctuary in which Peterson could sequester himself and pretend he was immune to political claims and realities. Furthermore, it flew in the face of human experience, and also of Christian faith, to say that political events, political structures, and the like were somehow to be imagined as exempt from religious reflection and divine validation.

This is not the place to respond on Peterson's behalf,⁴⁶ but this much should be said: Schmitt (willfully?) misunderstood Peterson to be claiming to inhabit an apolitical space. That was not his view at all. Rather, Peterson was asserting the *superiority* of the religious to the political: the supranational kingship of Christ admitted of no merely national rival, and genuinely imperial rivals had ceased to exist in the modern world. The Church's claim to exercise a *potestas indirecta* ("indirect power"—the phrase is Cardinal Rob-

ert Bellarmine's) in matters political definitively separated a Christian from a pagan conception of politics.⁴⁷

"The Book on the Angels" (1935)

Das Buch von den Engeln ("The Book on the Angels") is sometimes called Peterson's most finished theological work, even though, like other treatises in this collection, it is actually a composite of previous publications.⁴⁸ It was certainly his most widely read book, with Italian, French, and Spanish translations appearing during his lifetime and an English version shortly after his death.⁴⁹ It may also have been his favorite. According to Heinrich Schlier, who later held Peterson's New Testament chair at Bonn (and who eventually also followed him into the Catholic Church), it was a book "written from his heart."⁵⁰

The book presents itself as a contribution to angelology, a theological field of study that Peterson takes seriously and refuses to treat as an antiquarian exercise. What his biographer calls his "mythical" realism, his refusal to distance himself intellectually from the spiritual and demonic world of the New Testament, no doubt has several explanations, including the influence of phenomenology on Peterson's reading of ancient religious texts.⁵¹ Ultimately, perhaps, it stems from Peterson's own religious sensibility, which was acutely and even painfully aware of the world as both provisional and somehow transparent. For him the existence of angels and also demons was not open to doubt.

"The Book on the Angels" was written to explain the angels' spiritual function, which revealed itself most fully in worship and in mysticism. An ethereal triad of angels, liturgy, and mysticism may seem like an unpromising platform from which to expound on the public character of Christianity. And yet that is what Peterson does. The angels' role in worship and prayer has a public and even a political character. The heavenly worship of the angels—and therefore implicitly of the Church on earth as well—has, he says, an original relationship to the political world, a thesis he demonstrates first in his reading of chapters 4 and 5 of the book of Revelation; then via a rich array of ancient liturgical texts; and finally, on a cosmic scale, in mystical experience. When the hymnody of the universal Church's earthly liturgy is joined with the hymnody of the heavenly liturgy, it transcends all national hymnody, an assertion in which we can

hear an implicit rebuke of the blaring nationalistic anthems beloved of the Nazis. And when he says that “the knowledge of the Church, which stands behind its worship and hymnody, [is] a ‘final’ knowledge, because it has subordinated every other knowledge, such as for example *that derived from the political situation of a people* [emphasis added]”, he is attacking a central thesis of the Nazified political theology of the day. Here is his peroration:

The preceding exposition has perhaps shown that it was not arbitrary or pointless for us to have given our attention to the meaning of the doctrine of the angels. There is an immediate implication for the doctrine of the holy Church: the Church is more than just a human religious society, because the angels and the saints in heaven also belong to it. Seen from this perspective, then, the Church’s worship is never a merely human affair: no, the angels, like the entire cosmos, take part in it. To the Church’s singing corresponds heavenly singing, and, just like the participation in the heavenly singing, so too is the Church’s inner life linked. The angels demonstrate that the Church’s worship is a public worship that is offered to God, and because the angels possess a relationship to the religio-political world in heaven, through them the Church’s worship also acquires a necessary relationship to the political sphere. Lastly, the angels in their singing are linked with the Church not only in those “like the angels” and in the “people,” they are also at the same time the awakeners of the mystical life in the Church, which only finds its fulfillment when humanity, joined with the choirs of angels, begins to praise God from the depths of its creatureliness.

Peterson’s political reading of the liturgy ironically put him in bad odor at Maria Laach Abbey, the center of the liturgical renewal movement, whose chief theoretician was the Benedictine scholar Odo Casel.⁵² He and Peterson fell out over Casel’s account of the Christian sacraments as answers to the pagan mysteries. Casel bridled at Peterson’s emphasis on the *Öffentlichkeit* of the sacraments and their legal-cultic character. For his part, Peterson (trained, remember, in the History of Religions School, but by the mid-1920s skeptical of Reitzenstein) insisted that the Christian sacraments could only be understood in eschatological terms, as the figural breaking in of the New Age, which would not be fully realized until the End. They were not a personal *experience* of salvation in Christ but its proleptic realization. (It should be noted that Peterson’s difficulties with Maria Laach may also have had to do with his critique of the *Reichstheologie*, which was favored by the abbot, Ildefons Herwegen.)

“Christ as Emperor” (1936)

“Christus als Imperator,” a dense little gem of an article on ancient ruler cult, first appeared in a Catholic periodical.⁵³ A year later, it was tacked onto *Zeuge der Wahrheit* (“Witness to the Truth”) when that was first published in 1937, and then reprinted in *Theologische Traktate*. They share similar themes and were written in the same circumstance: the tightening grip of the National Socialist dictatorship. Within its scholarly carapace, “Christ as Emperor” (I am leaving the imperial title untranslated) leaves no doubt about its contemporary relevance as a critique of absolute power and a call to Christian resistance. When Peterson quotes Vergil’s famous line “imperium sine fine dedi” (“I have given empire without end,” *Aeneid* 1.278f.), and then shows how Christians adapted it to mean that the *imperium Christi* was the real empire without end, the allusion to the thousand-year Reich is unmistakable. When he says of the oath taken in the imperial cult that it raised the question of whether a Christian could recognize an un-Christian historical and political “worldview” (the Nazis were always vaunting their *Weltanschauung*), he is reminding readers of the loyalty plebiscite and the army and civil service oaths of 1934. His analysis of the political and religious situation that gave rise to the imperial cult mirrored Peterson’s view of how the situation in Germany enabled the dictatorship: local institutions had withered in the face of imperial expansion, the masses were ungovernable without an absolute ruler, and traditional religion was in decline. As a result, he says of Augustus and his successors, “the *princeps*, the leader, had to unify all power in himself.” This was precisely what Peterson thought was happening in Germany, where Nazi *Gleichschaltung* (regimentation) was crushing competing institutions, a new ruler cult was being created, and secularization was hollowing out the nation’s Christian heritage. In such an extreme situation, early Christian eschatological urgency was once again relevant:

Then we shall understand how Christ can be praised in hymn as king of the world to come, but how *even now* [emphasis in original] majesty and power are ascribed to him in the acclamations of the Church, how the historical and political world-picture of this Aeon, which makes the *princeps* the executor of *Tyche* [Fortune] is overcome in bloody conflict by the martyrs, how the Eucharistic banquet that the Church celebrates is not only a *mysterium* but already has something of the eschatological banquet in it, which the Lord will celebrate with his own upon his return (Luke 19:30).

“Witness to the Truth” (1937)

“Witness to the Truth” (*Zeuge der Wahrheit*) makes a fitting coda to the collection, steeped as it is in themes of witness, eschatological division, suffering, and ultimate triumph.⁵⁴ Once again we are dealing with a composite work assembled from previous essays. Familiar biblical texts dominate. From the gospels we have both Jesus’ preaching of the Kingdom in Matthew (the Sermon on the Mount, the commissioning of the disciples) and the trial scene with Pontius Pilate in John. Above all we again meet the book of Revelation, which held an enduring not to say obsessive fascination for Erik Peterson, and about which he recalls a vivid childhood memory. Liturgical references abound, including the new feast of Christ the King, established by Pope Pius XI in 1925. And the title is taken from Søren Kierkegaard, who appears here less as lonely knight of faith and more as a Savonarola to a complacent Christianity: “If there is anything that is the opposite of the spirit of bourgeois comfort, it is primitive Christianity, which in the mouth of the martyr in Revelation blasts us like some fiery breath.”

Martyrdom, Peterson tells his readers, is not just a historical memory but once again a real possibility, indeed, a mark of the Church: “A Church that does not suffer is not the apostolic Church.” The martyr’s witness is emphatically public: “The martyr demonstrates the public claim of the Church of Jesus Christ.” In the eschatological age inaugurated by Christ, *neutrality is no longer possible and a decision, for or against, must be made.* That is the message of “Witness to the Truth.” It has consequences both in the intellectual and the political sphere. Just as one cannot escape the necessity to decide by hiding behind the shield of (alleged) scientific objectivity, so the political order can’t dodge it by suspending judgment on matters metaphysical. “Because human thinking is never independent of the *hic et nunc* of a political order of some kind, it inevitably stands either under the power of the Antichrist or the power of Christ.”

That is a very strong claim. Peterson is not only saying that the regime of the Antichrist forces a decision on us, one that may require us to pay in blood. *Any* regime that does not recognize Christ is ipso facto in the service of Christ’s enemy. Behind that claim is a critique of “pluralism” long popular with Christian conservatives hostile to the fragmentation imposed by modernity (popular sovereignty, capitalism, social emancipation,

specialization of knowledge, etc.). Peterson ratchets up the urgency of the critique by framing it eschatologically in the phenomenon of martyrdom: “For the revelation of Christ also makes visible for the martyr *the metaphysical disorientation that marks the false political order* [emphasis added]: the political, whose plane of activity is in the world of pluralism, is always tempted to abandon the ultimate metaphysical orientation and to seek its gods in the world of the pluralistic.”

By orienting *his* critique to the coming New Age rather than to a disappearing and irretrievable past, Peterson freed himself from the temptation of nostalgic Catholic conservatives to seek a rapprochement with the National Socialists, whom he saw with the mask stripped away: “[The martyrs] must conquer because the Antichrist wages war against the saints, because he forces a decision on them *by making the political symbol a cultic object* [emphasis added].” In 1937, the relevance of that was clear for those who had eyes to see.

What it has to say to those of us who live today, with middling contentment, in the shambling structures of liberal democracy is less clear. “Witness to the Truth” is certainly a powerful summons to resistance. But who will its audience be? Radical Christians living on the edge of a society they think has lost its soul? Conservative if not reactionary Christians obsessed with the so-called culture of death? Melancholy contemplatives? What is the prospect for a Christian politics that appears to regard as illegitimate “every political system that does not let itself be limited by the kingship of Christ”?

Although unsure of the answer to that, I am pleased to present this collection of Erik Peterson’s essays, as the provocative legacy of a gifted and idiosyncratic critic of the spirit of the age, someone who frankly described himself in St. Paul’s pungent phrase “as one born out of due time” (1 Cor. 15:8).⁵⁵ The Greek word St. Paul uses of himself here, *ektrōma*, literally means a premature birth, a miscarriage, or even an aborted fetus. In keeping with Erik Peterson’s own refusal to seek closure before its time, let us leave it to the future to decide whether he was born too early—or too late.

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