

INTRODUCTION

VINCENT W. LLOYD

The French prime minister looked “like a communion wafer dipped in shit.”¹ It is hard to understand Aimé Césaire’s description of Georges Bidault as anything but a metaphor that troubles the core of political theology, the homology between political sovereign and God. In light of the colonial massacres of nonwhite populations—Bidault led the Fourth Republic at the start of the Indochina War and was foreign minister during the Malagasy Uprising—the French sovereign is profaned, grotesque. In Césaire’s characteristic reversal, he inverts the civilized and the savage, locating “howling savagery” at the heart of Europe. But the image is equivocal; savagery mimes civilization, and paganism mimes Christianity. The image suggests the possibility of cleansing, purifying, and returning to the sovereign who properly looks like a communion wafer, like the Body of Christ.

Césaire’s is a political theology from the perspective of the nonwhite, from the perspective of negritude—often euphemistically left untranslated instead of exhibited in its intended ugliness: niggerness. Race as color, as ideology, as institutional logic, as resource, as imagination is joined with religion as symbol, as practice, as ethos, as resource, as imagination, joined by Césaire in political critique. *Discourse on Colonialism*, Césaire’s 1950 prose-poem, opens by declaring Europe to be “spiritually indefensible.”

The opposition of Europe, civilization, and Christianity to non-Europe, savagery, and paganism is unsustainable. Césaire's target is more than false consciousness; for him, Christianity is more than symbol or belief held superficially. Christianity is also an ethos, a set of virtues and values. To be a good Christian—to be among the “virtuous young men educated by the Jesuit Fathers”—is to be a good bourgeois, and this is to have the habits that make for a successful colonial administrator. Missionaries are among the most virulent racists, Césaire suggests.²

After studying in France, Césaire returned to his home in Martinique and wrote his autobiographical poem, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*. It was an impossible return. In the poem Césaire describes himself, seeing his land again, as “a lone man imprisoned in whiteness,” finding his home a place of fear and hunger and exhaustion, the morning “slowly vomiting out its human fatigue,” a place where “neither the teacher in his classroom, nor the priest at catechism will / be able to get a word out of this sleepy little nigger.” Yet childhood memories of “foolish and crazy stunts” along with “the bread, / and the wine of complicity” remind of youthful communion, since lost, perhaps educated away. And there was Christmas, with joys and dreams and tastes and smells and laughter and gossip and song: Alleluia, Christ is risen. It is ecstatic song that moves from voices to bodies to spirits, “the hands, the feet, the buttocks, the genitals, and your entire being liquefies into sounds, voices, and rhythm”; it “starts pulling the nearest devil by the tail,” muting laments and fears.³

After Christmas, fear and exhaustion return: the town “crawls on its hands without the slightest desire to drill the sky with / a stature of protest,” the risen Christ an opiate and no more. The whiteness that imprisons is not only the outsider's perspective; it is the whiteness of religion, of Christianity, as well. But there is a response, a transformation of values, realigned from the perspective of niggerness. Whiteness and niggerness are asymmetrical; niggerness congeals the inchoate identities of the nonwhite, starting with the Jew and proceeding to the Kaffir, the Hindu, the Harlem man, and proceeding to the “famine-man,” “insult-man,” and “torture-man.” Reason is displaced by the madness of memory, lament, visions, dreams. “An apostate,” the narrator proclaims himself, “I too / have assassinated God,” “Worshipped the Zambeze.” The poetry turns to incantation, punctuated by a sorcerer's

calls, “voum rooh oh,” that wake the dead and control the skies. Christian impotence is displaced by pagan conjuring, with human capacity to control the world—“Leaving Europe utterly twisted with screams.”⁴

Yet in his “virile prayer” to be granted “the savage faith of the sorcerer,” it is possible to read a thickening, rather than a rejection, of Christianity. The ecstatic moment of Christmas and the ecstatic cries of the African sorcerer are moments of fantasy to be traversed. What remains is not the secular but a religiosity complicated. Having passed through the language of virility, the poem praises those who have not explored or conquered, those who “yield, captivated, to the essence of things / ignorant of surfaces but captivated by the motion of all things / indifferent to conquering, but playing the game of the world.” The weak and the simple are saved, not the strong and knowledgeable. Grief and joy and love are extolled in the ordinary, not relegated to ecstasy. The greatest of these, all that is left once the world is accepted as it is and the poet finds himself “only a man,” is love. Rejecting his identity as a father, a brother, a son, or a husband, the poet wishes to be a lover, not of a woman but of a people. After the poet accepts laughter and fear and agony, it becomes possible to set them aside, “my eyes fixed on this town which I prophesy, beautiful.” The new town, the heavenly city, is the vision of the lover, born not of hatred but of “universal hunger” and “universal thirst.” It is a vision that was made possible by, and required, acceptance—undistorted accounting, and feeling, of the world as it is. And it is a vision that motivates action: protest, prophecy, and revolution (the place to begin, Césaire writes, is at the end of the world).⁵

For Césaire, we might say, there is a political theology of Christmas as holiday and a political theology of the sorcerer, both entranced by the exceptional moment of religious ecstasy that ultimately reaffirms European sovereignty, white privilege. There is an alternative political theology, visible from the perspective of niggerness, that transforms the sovereign exception into the everyday, that sees each individual—every famine-man, insult-man, and torture-man, everyone who recognizes in themselves a universal hunger and thirst—into a creator, capable of dancing and conjuring, of seeing the miraculous in the ordinary, of protesting injustice, of loving.⁶ To cleanse the communion wafer of excrement requires seeing communion everywhere, not just in the face of the (racist and genocidal)

prime minister. But this is a difficult communion, a communion of the future, of an imagined town, prophesied by means of the careful analysis of the problems of the day.

WHAT CÉSAIRE'S WORK ILLUSTRATES is how conversations about political theology might be complicated and thickened when race is taken into account. Similarly, discussions of race that avoid political theology limit theoretical imagination. The burgeoning interest in political theology across the humanities has curiously ignored discussions such as these.

This burgeoning interest results, in part, from changing background assumptions about religion. Scholars have realized that treating religion as most essentially a private belief is a very specific, very Protestant approach.⁷ Many Christianities, and many other non-Christian traditions, see religion just as much about community as about the individual or do not make this distinction at all. Closely related to this descriptive claim about the essence of religion is the normative claim that religion ought to be a private matter. The reasoning goes that religion has the potential, perhaps the unique potential, to cause discord and violence when it is permitted to show its face in public.⁸ Clearly, the imperative to restrict religion to the private sphere complements the Protestant notion that religion is primarily a private matter. As the descriptive claims about what religion is and how violent it is are called into question, the foundations of the normative claim are weakened; the normative claim appears increasingly like a passive-aggressive assertion of Protestant hegemony. Political theology presents itself as an alternative approach to both descriptive and normative questions, an approach that leaves behind implicit assumptions and adds complexity to these conversations.

Recent years have also displayed the limitations of the secularization thesis, the claim that religions will wither away in the modern world.⁹ The contemporary religious landscape is, as all can see, robust and dynamic. One might hypothesize that the forms of religiosity in decline are those that ostensibly reject political theology, seeing religious commitment as a personal matter distinct from political ideas and beliefs; those that are on the rise, and increasingly visible, embrace a deep connection between religious and political ideas. Charles Taylor's recent revision of the secularization thesis could

be read as an attempt to push those religious communities traditionally allergic to political theology to accept that secularization itself should be understood as a theological transformation, necessitating a theological response.¹⁰

The phrase “political theology” is sometimes used in a very narrow sense, sometimes in a very broad sense, and sometimes in a sectarian sense. Most narrowly, political theology refers to claims by the German jurist Carl Schmitt concerning the role of religious concepts in political theory. According to Schmitt, in a given place and time in European history there is a homology between particularly significant Christian concepts and particularly significant political concepts.¹¹ Crudely put, the king is like God; theorizing the powers of the king, or the state, parallels the work of theology. Intellectual historians have investigated the context in which Schmitt’s ideas arose, political theorists have investigated the relevance of Schmitt’s claims for understanding contemporary democracies, and philosophers have parsed the political theological concepts Schmitt identified.

In the broadest sense, political theology is used almost interchangeably with the phrase “religion and politics.” Political theology in this sense refers to the many ways that religion (religious ideas, but religious ideas are hardly separable from religious practices and institutions) shapes politics (political ideas, but, again, political ideas are hardly separable from political practices and institutions). If Catholics and Evangelicals support different political parties, the explanation may have to do with political theology. Or it may not; the explanation may be reductionist, turning to nontheological factors such as demographic or cultural differences to explain the difference in political affiliation. The investigation of political and religious concepts that arise, and conjoin, takes place throughout the humanities, from literary studies to anthropology to political theory and religious studies. If social scientists approach religion and politics by reducing religion away, political theology just names the approach that scholars of the humanities take to these same questions, allowing religion a robust, multifaceted meaning.

It would be tempting, but misleading, to associate “religion and politics” with the empirical and “political theology” with the theoretical. Indeed, understood in the broad sense, political theology is often empirical, beginning with careful examination of specific religious communities and their religious ideas. No claims need to be made about the relationship of reli-

gious and political ideas in general (or “in theory”); the scholar of political theology may be content with one particular location or one particular text. As a result, political theology need not have any particular affiliation with Christianity. There is a flourishing literature on Jewish political theology, and an increasing literature on Islamic political theology, with other religions sure to follow suit.

Yet the broad sense of political theology can become frustrating in its expansiveness. What is frustrating is not necessarily the variety of contexts, and texts, to which the term is brought to bear but the distance that the term moves away from the rich and subtle understanding of religion and politics that characterizes Schmitt’s work at its best. Religion and politics are both concepts with complicated genealogies. The best work in political theology has an impulse to use the conjunction of the two, the political and the theological, to explore the difficulties involved in each. It is tempting to understand “the political” as a narrow set of ideas, for example, about sovereignty or about an amorphous notion of social change. It is similarly tempting to understand “the theological” as a narrow set of ideas concerning God’s relationship to himself and to the world or about divinely sanctioned moral imperatives. But political and theological ideas are much more complex and not separable from political and religious practices, institutions, cultures, and histories. To consider but one example, love is not only an attribute of God in Christian theology but also a human virtue. Recent work has studied the political implications of this virtue when practiced, for example, at a school board meeting.¹²

Although there has been some discussion of political theology outside North American and European contexts, there has been strikingly little discussion of race and political theology. Perhaps the reason is that race seems especially restricted to a particular historical and cultural context; theology, of course, is rather misleadingly supposed to be in some sense universal. Further, the religious ideas most often discussed in the context of political theology, God’s attributes and workings in the world, seem independent of racial considerations (with the notable exception of the religious ideas of certain new religious movements and, of course, black theology). Similarly, it is hard to imagine a racial politics in any sort of generic sense; racial politics has to do more with political practice than political theory. At most,

politics and theology both have to grapple with difference, and it is here that race may enter the discussion. Race is one difference among others, and there is no reason to suppose that racial difference would be treated any differently than regional difference, linguistic difference, or gender difference. Investigations of political theology in a particular context might grapple with issues of race, but investigating race, it would seem, has little to say about political theology in general.

Yet political theology in the narrow view, associated with the work of Schmitt, is intimately connected with questions of race. Schmitt's association with National Socialism, and the centrality of the concept of a people rooted in the earth to his thought, forces the issue.¹³ That race disappears when political theology expands from a narrow to a broad sense is troubling; perhaps it suggests that, even in the broad sense, political theology is haunted by race. Indeed, National Socialist Germany is the turning point in Aimé Césaire's narrative, the Jew his first example of the racial other. The political theology that authorized colonial atrocities was exposed in its raw barbarism by the Nazis. Césaire writes that Hitler would "reveal to the very distinguished, very humanistic, very Christian bourgeois of the twentieth century that without his being aware of it, he has a Hitler inside him, that Hitler inhabits him, that Hitler is his demon."¹⁴ The excrement already coating Christianity starts to stink in Europe itself.

Césaire's reflections point toward a tension between the narrow and broad senses of political theology subtler than the labels suggest. Might the broad sense of political theology effect a universalizing of the Christian simply by asking the questions that it poses? This need no longer be a "white" Christianity—Césaire's project is to polish away that whiteness—but it may remain a Christianity nonetheless. Scholars of religion have pointed to the very specific, very Protestant heritage of their object of study; Marxists and feminists have made analogous observations about politics. Yet with the political and the theological conjoined, political theology often escapes such worries.

If political theology is understood as arising in a European, Christian context, expanding outward more recently to other contexts, and maintaining a pretense of universality, then race and political theology may be intimately, inextricably bound. J. Kameron Carter's recent work has tracked

how the figure of the Jew initiates the European-Christian racial imagination, laying the foundation for understanding colonial others and, in the North American context, understanding African American racial difference.¹⁵ The academic enterprise of genealogy is intended to explore precisely this: how the image of a “scholarly toolkit” elides the political struggles that give rise to, and shape, each “tool,” how one who employs tools is an unwitting partisan in these struggles. Inquiries into race and political theology can be seen as genealogical inquiries, uncovering these forgotten struggles and allowing the scholar to become a witting participant—and perhaps dissolving the image of the dispassionate scholar bringing political theology in her trusty toolkit to the data.

In addition to the narrow and broad senses of political theology is what might be called a sectarian sense of the phrase. Political theology in this sense is just the branch of theology that deals with political questions. Theology, uncharitably, is as phantasmal as alchemy or astrology, a pseudo-academic field founded on beliefs in the supernatural. More charitably, theology is a second-order religious discourse, a conversation about what Christians ought and ought not say or do. In either case, theology is opposed to secular academic inquiry, is opposed to, among other things, the secular study of religions. When political theology is understood as the branch of theology concerned with politics—for example, when it is understood as reflection on what Christians ought and ought not say or do in politics—it seems to have no place in the secular academy. It is an activity of believers, for believers.

Although there is an active conversation about political theology as a branch of theology, this sectarian sense of the phrase certainly does not characterize the burgeoning conversations about political theology in the academic humanities. But the sectarian sense of the phrase is not altogether isolated. The academic journal *Political Theology*, originally subtitled *The Journal of Christian Socialism*, has increasingly featured secular academic discussions of political theology. But the very distinction between these two conversations, like that between theology and secular religious studies, brings with it questionable assumptions. Once personal belief is no longer taken as the core of religiosity, as soon as the importance of community and ritual and culture and tradition are acknowledged, what it might mean for theology to be by and for believers becomes obscure. If, for example,

religion is more like a language and theology more like a grammar, the supposed distinction between secular conversations about political theology and sectarian, Christian conversations quickly recedes.¹⁶

Carl Schmitt himself complicates the distinction between secular and theological inquiry into political theology. Schmitt was a Catholic in a Protestant-dominated German academic landscape, and he was distanced from the Catholic Church after divorcing his first wife and remarrying. His nostalgia and hope mix faith and scholarship.¹⁷ Even though it is well known that Schmitt wrote about race and about political theology, how these two themes are connected and how they are connected to Schmitt's other famous concept, of the existential enemy and friend, are less frequently discussed. Out of this silence, there arises a general sense that Schmitt considered the figure of the Jew as that of the existential enemy and commended the Nazi mistreatment of Jews because it involved the exercise of sovereign authority in a Godlike sense, that is, because it involved the ability to suspend the law. That Schmitt concluded a 1936 speech by quoting from *Mein Kampf*, "By fending off the Jew, I struggle for the work of the Lord," gives this interpretation significant persuasive force.¹⁸

But this attempt at adding cohesion to Schmitt's theoretical writings and political activity overlooks the complications of his character. An outsider aspiring to intellectual importance, rapidly achieving and rapidly losing influence within the Third Reich, frustrated by his postwar internment and never willing to recant his far from clear-cut wartime views, exercising a quiet but broad influence after the war from his provincial home while revisiting his earlier works, Schmitt was certainly not the dogmatic figure he is sometimes portrayed to be. His instincts were certainly conservative but more creatively than rigidly so. His personal diaries exhibited an unnervingly crude anti-Semitism, dovetailing all too well with his public wartime condemnations of "Jewish" jurisprudence, yet like that of any committed intellectual his work, at its best, exhibits an analytical rigor that allows for independence from the day's conventional wisdom that his diaries so easily echo.

Schmitt's work consists of two apparently independent moments, bound together by political theology. The first moment emphasizes the importance for politics of a people, a group rooted in a location. In the opening lines of *The Concept of the Political* we read that "the state is a specific entity

of a people.”¹⁹ On a nearly opposite topic, Schmitt suggests that the partisan is properly telluric, coming from and living off the earth.²⁰ In his reflections on international law, Schmitt begins by describing how “the earth became known as the mother of law,” how “the fertile earth contains within herself, within the womb of her fecundity, an inner measure.”²¹ This Schmitt takes as the starting point for his account of a European legal order, one that rejects both Soviet and American hegemony.

The second moment in Schmitt’s work, which at first seems directly opposed to the first, emphasizes the existential. It is the political that makes the state possible, and the basis of the political is the distinction between friends and enemies. There is no feeling of hatred directed at political enemies and no feeling of warmth directed at political friends. The distinction between political friends and political enemies cannot be reduced to economic or moral or cultural affiliation. It is, paradoxically, pure antagonism, uncontaminated by feelings or reasons. Politics consists in helping one’s friends and harming one’s enemies. Politics is war by other means. Liberalism, and parliamentary democracy, suppresses the political, purporting to provide a venue for political discourse while actually eliminating the space for the existential enmity constitutive of the political. Specific values are advanced under the guise of being universal conditions for politics (reasonableness, free communication, and so on). In his theory of the partisan, Schmitt suggests that political commitment sets the partisan apart from criminals or vagabonds. And in his theory of international law, Schmitt distinguishes *nomos*, which comes about through the dividing or appropriating of land, from law, rules that order society. Schmitt does not call for a reunion of law and *nomos*; in fact, he acknowledges that from the earliest times the two have been split. The land and the people rooted in a land are a necessary but not sufficient element of politics. A second, existential moment is necessary.

These two moments in Schmitt’s work appear to be precariously maintained simultaneously without explanation or justification. It is in his account of political theology that this apparent tension is resolved. Schmitt famously asserts, “All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.”²² As deism gained popularity, with its understanding of a withdrawn God and a world governed by the law of nature accessible to humans, the monarch retreated, leaving a constitutional

state governed by laws. The whims of the monarch no longer affected the laws of the state, just as God no longer was thought to act in the world through miracles. In the early nineteenth century, as God's relationship to the world transformed from one of transcendence to one of immanence, sovereign authority came to be understood as held collectively by citizens, the ruler and the ruled the same, the state an organic entity.

Schmitt's claim about the relationship between political and theological concepts is not simply a claim about history. It is also a claim about the current political vocabulary. To understand the meaning of sovereignty, one should start by thinking through what theologians have to say about God's authority. To understand the meaning of political community, one should start by thinking through what theologians have to say about religious community, about the Christian Church. The church has two faces, visible and invisible. It is a collection of sinful humans, and it is also holy, the Body of Christ. There is no worldly explanation for these two identities; it is a mystery.²³ Christians go awry when they forget about this duality, when they focus on either the visible church or the invisible church. Indeed, this is the same paradox at the heart of Christian faith: that Jesus is the Christ, that God can become man.

The two moments of Schmitt's thought are bound together by this mystery. A state grows from a people, but the political is a prerequisite for a state. A people is rooted in a land and at the same time is constituted by existential friendship and by shared existential enmity directed outward. A partisan is at once rooted in his land and committed to political ideals. *Nomos* and positive law are jointly, and separately, the foundation of international law. Schmitt's targets are those who would quash the mystery. He opposes those who would locate political enmity in worldly factors, such as cultural or class difference. He opposes those who would offer a political system supposedly capable of mediating all competing interests in a society. In cases such as these, the church visible and the church invisible are confused—or rather, their political analogues are confused. To put it strongly, taking perhaps too much liberty, race and politics are linked, according to Schmitt, by political theology.

Yet Schmitt is not the necessary starting point for contemporary discussions of political theology. Schmitt's work has been complicated over the

years, and new questions about the racially inflected relationship between the political and the theological have emerged. The chapters that follow explore the openings created for conversations about race when the canon of political theology is shaken up, when new figures (Du Bois, Baldwin, Shakespeare) are permitted entry, when priority is given to figures previously considered secondary (Stapel, Brunner), and when the political landscape shifts to the contemporary (Israel, the United States). This is not an entirely new project: the past several decades have seen a variety of reformations of political theology, a few of which will be surveyed here.

Immediate reactions to Schmitt's work were varied, although discussion of race has often been limited to condemnations of Schmitt's anti-Semitism. In the wake of the Second World War, political theology became the label of a German theological movement that took Schmitt's work as a starting point but complicated it, intending to purge racist possibilities. Erik Peterson, an early leader of this movement, emphasized that the connection between political sovereign and God began before Christianity, and that Christianity actually complicated this connection by positing a Trinitarian God.²⁴ That one person of the Trinity was crucified by the Roman (political) regime further complicates this relationship. Work by Jürgen Moltmann, Johann Baptist Metz, and Dorothee Sölle explores the political significance of a suffering God. For these theologians the Holocaust looms large, and the memory of suffering is seen as a potent political resource. Secular modernity has little experience grappling with suffering, but Christianity has much experience grappling with the crucial nexus of suffering and freedom.²⁵

Schmitt gives center stage to the secularized theological concept of sovereignty, but some have worried that a focus on sovereignty reinforces the status quo. Political theological inquiry that follows Schmitt would result, at most, in the conclusion that the form sovereignty takes would need to be reformed; what if a more radical critique is desired? Is there a way to call sovereignty itself into question? The theological vocabulary that separates the time of world and the end of time offers resources for such a critique. In light of the *eschaton*, worldly dealings matter little, and worldly powers tremble. To invoke the *eschaton*, to speak of the *eschaton*'s rapid approach, and to invoke he who will bring about the *eschaton* are ways of invoking a higher power, of undercutting sovereign authority.