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Recontesting the Sacred: political theology as ideological method

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ABSTRACT
In this paper, we explore the contribution that political theology can make to the study of political ideologies. In foregrounding the interaction between theological and political ways of thinking, political theology traces the lingering presence of the sacred in secular politics. It refers not merely to religious doctrines but also to a variety of ways of registering the 'extraordinary' dimension in modern political orders. We sketch the development of political theological analysis from the sovereign-centric account famously proffered by Carl Schmitt to more recent versions that identify the sacred with a plurality of struggles against secular power. New types of ideological formation, we argue, can be interpreted as instances of this latter political theology, particularly those expressing what we call a radical politics of redemption that recontests the moral foundations of politics. Although highly divergent, these typically underscore the threat to a specified sacred source, make appeals to the lived experience of suffering and mobilize supporters as a model of communion seeking moral healing. We consider the example of contemporary populism to illustrate this redemptive mode of theological politics and recommend political theology, a method that can supplement the study of political ideology.

Ideological analysis has had to come to terms with recent political phenomena that might be described as 'post-ideological' and that cannot be slotted easily into existing definitional categories. How to define contemporary forms of populism that have, at best, a 'thin-centred' ideational structure[1] and which might be better understood as a kind of 'performative' politics[2] rather than a distinct worldview? What about conspiracy theories that construct bizarre and outlandish narratives to explain social reality or anti-vaccination movements that combine elements from the far left and far right, and whose only unifying idea is suspicion of elites and of scientific authority? How should we think about the millenarian and apocalyptic discourses of climate justice movements? Our political space is increasingly contested – indeed *disrupted* – by new and ideologically heterogeneous movements and narratives that are difficult to identify as distinct 'clusters' of ideas and which instead work more on an affective or emotional level.

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In this paper, we argue that political theology – a tradition of thought focused on the translation of theological into secular political concepts – provides a valuable *supplement* to the study of political ideologies that can help us understand these phenomena. Political theology highlights the vital presence in human experience of the sacred, that is, of an 'ultimate', existential horizon inside which secular politics and ideologies also operate. Rather than refer only to overtly religious doctrines or the persistence of religion and religious beliefs in public life, political theology provides a useful frame to examine how secular thought and action become immersed in a peculiar *theo*-logic that foregrounds this sacred dimension. For instance, in contemporary politics, we regularly see the recurrence of religious motifs, whether in the desire for transcendence and spiritual communion invested in otherwise non-religious ideas of 'the people' or 'the nation', or a messianic faith in the figure of the leader, or an apocalyptic 'end of times' narrative associated with the ecological crisis.

Rather than interpreting these motifs and narratives as religious ideologies, we think that they can be better grasped as instances of political theology: that is, as forms of discourse that resist alignment with established ideological configurations by reasserting a sacred horizon. In its orientation around what theologian Paul Tillich once called 'matters of ultimate concern' – that is, with 'revealed truth' and existential questions – political theology analysis can help explore the shifting terrain of contemporary post-secular political ideologies. In particular, it can capture variegated and heterogeneous modes of experience that cannot otherwise be articulated within the coordinates of nominally secular political ideologies.

To be clear, then, we are not suggesting that political theology is merely another instance of ideology. Rather, it describes a *dimension* of ideological activity that is increasingly visible. We are interested in the frame that political theology – as an approach to analysing political discourse – can offer to the study of ideologies as 'ideas clusters'. According to Michael Freeden's morphological approach, ideology functions by 'decontesting' meaning: it imposes a certain order onto otherwise heterogeneous and conflicting ideas, thus allowing us to construct a coherent sense of the world: 'We can only access the political world through decontesting the contested conceptual arrangements that enable us to make sense of that world, and we do so – deliberately or unconsciously – by imposing specific meanings onto the indeterminate range of meanings that our conceptual clusters can hold.'[3] Political theology, we claim, operates in a somewhat different way: it decontests but, also, *recontests* meaning. Thus, in sacralizing a certain order of experience, it aims to reorientate political life towards a renewed set of moral and ethical concerns or to a certain ideological vision of the good. Yet, in doing so, it also disorders established conceptual horizons, transferring them to an altogether different, often 'redemptive' register: the rational application of politics is now overdetermined by urgent, sometimes extravagant questions of justice that at the same time expose its limits; politics is made to express the ineffable; political activity becomes the conveyer of other-worldly concerns, a spiritual rather than purely instrumental practice. The exposure of the language of politics to the language of theology profoundly unsettles the normal, rational coordinates of public discourse.

A key aim of the paper, then, is to redescribe political theology, not as a normative set of concerns but, rather, as the basis for a method of ideological analysis suited to tracing instances of 'theo-logic' in the contemporary post-ideological terrain. We argue that by

focusing on the sacred, and in exposing its enduring effects on the secular political space, political theology introduces into the investigation of ideologies insights that help us understand some of the peculiar forms and references of political contest – such as *suffering* and *communion* – that cut across a range of ideological positions.

The argument proceeds in four key steps. First, we present political theology as a mode of analysis concerned with the interaction between religious and political spheres of experience and with the way that theological concepts come to inform political concepts in the secular world. In revealing new sources of the sacred in contemporary secular societies, political theology, we argue, blurs the line between the secular and the non-secular, inviting us to trace the signs of theology in modern political contests.

Second, we sketch the concept of political theology derived from the conservative German jurist and political theorist Carl Schmitt, who, in his seminal 1922 work *Politische Theologie*, referred to the secularization of theological concepts like God and the miracle into political and juridical categories like sovereignty and the state of exception. While Schmitt's definition serves as a touchstone and point of departure for much politico-theological investigation, we argue that his model is reductionist, sovereign-centric and focused entirely on the institutional dimension of politics.

Our third step is to develop an alternative account of political theology that allows us better to understand the dynamic and diverse forms of post-secular politics. Here, we turn to post-war theologians like JB Metz and Jurgen Moltmann, as well as to post-modern theologians like Graham Ward, all of whom, in different ways, seek a more public role for religious theology and particularly for the church in contemporary societies. This alternative approach takes a less reductionist view and is more attuned to analysing politics at an *experiential*, rather than primarily institutional, level.

Our fourth step is to show precisely how this rendering of political theology, in focusing on heterogeneous and plural references to the sacred, can help us investigate key aspects of contemporary ideological conflict. We argue that it invites us to explore a redemptive mode of ideological activity attentive to affective registers of experience, forms of political engagement and passionate attachments that, otherwise, are easily overlooked or dismissed as 'cultish'. In drawing attention to contests over the sacred and to the shifting meanings and emotional commitments invested in this idea, we suggest that political theology offers a valuable supplement to the study of ideologies. We return, briefly, to the example of populism to sketch these insights.

Political theology: the sacred and the secular

The study of ideologies has gained much from the concept of 'political religions', particularly in the historical understanding of totalitarian movements and ideologies like Fascism and National Socialism.[4] However, political theology, as a distinct area of enquiry and mode of analysis, has been largely absent from this field. Political theology is concerned with the interaction between religious and political ways of thinking and with the lingering influence of theological concepts and categories on modern secular political institutions and practices. Central to this is the idea of the sacred as a void made vacant by the collapse of the theological world in European societies in the sixteenth century and with the growing secularization of the state – and the way this absent place continues to have political effects.[5] Religious experience, it is understood, continues to make itself felt

in modern societies, not only in the overt form of religious convictions, practices and identifications – as sociologists of religion have never tired of reporting[6] – but also in more subtle ways: as beliefs, rituals, forms of association, institutional and non-institutional practices that are neither strictly religious nor strictly secular but which seem to blur the line between them. As Claude Lefort puts it,

> Can we not admit that, despite all the changes that have occurred, the religious survives in the guise of new beliefs and new representations, and that it can therefore return to the surface, in either traditional or novel forms, when conflicts become so acute as to produce cracks in the edifice of the state?[7]

Under conditions of modernity, the theological horizon of Western political thought and practice largely receded in its overtly religious forms. Nonetheless, it persisted as an 'existential' concern with sacred sources of power located, for example, in nature, selfhood or community. Indeed, what has now come to be called the 'post-secular' condition[8] – referring, among other things, to the 'return of religion' in secular societies and its impact on the public sphere[9] and on liberal notions of state neutrality[10] – highlights what political theology takes as its presupposition: that the secular condition was always premised upon the theological world it incorporated and replaced. Political theology, however, aims to make explicit this trace of the sacred – that is, the 'theo-logic' that organizes thought and behaviour – and explore its implications for the way we think about politics today.

It is our contention that the lingering influence of the sacred in secular societies has disruptive political effects. That is because the sacred expresses the precariousness of 'normal' collective existence. Political sociologist, Harald Wydra relates the sacred to experience of the 'extraordinary' – limit situations where people are confronted with the intrinsically fractured and contingent nature of their political existence (such as war or civil strife which lie outside 'normal' experience but nonetheless generate conditions for it): 'The extraordinary takes hold of people who have to face the brokenness of political reality.'[11] Such experiences result in efforts to contain the precarious conditions of their existence by sacralizing ideas of community, affiliation and identification – usually by setting apart certain shared symbols and holding them in reverence. The political imagination is thus characterized by a constant tension between the extraordinary moment of contingency and the desire, in response to it, to establish new markers of certainty and legitimacy: 'While the sacred is a symptom of disenchantment and crisis, it also is the yardstick for the just measure and the limit that restore boundaries.'[12] Similarly, Robert Yelle regards the sacred as a regenerative force in political life. He sees it expressed in ideas of sacrifice, moments of founding violence and carnivals and festivals that regenerate and revivify sovereignty.[13]

Political theology, then, describes a tradition of thinking that foregrounds the presence and disruptive force of this extraordinary dimension within the terms of secular existence. But how does the theological become present within the political? Before exploring political theology's value for studying political ideology, we need first to sketch the trajectory of its theoretical development.

Carl Schmitt's political theology

The emphasis on sovereignty as revealing the extraordinary, sacred dimension of political life persisting in secular modernity is largely associated with the political theology of the conservative Weimar-era jurist and political theorist, Carl Schmitt, who later became a leading jurist under the National Socialist regime. Deeply influenced by Roman Catholicism, albeit in a somewhat heterodox form, political theology was a constant preoccupation throughout his intellectual career from his early work from 1922 *Political Theology* [*Politische Theologie*] – along with similar texts around that time such as *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*[14] [1923] – to his later writings on the katechon and the Christian Empire,[15] through to his final published work, *Political Theology II*.[16] Schmitt's now famous formulation of the structural relationship between theology and politics goes as follows:

> All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development – in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state -, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver – but also because of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts. The exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology.[17]

Schmitt is concerned here with the secularization of theology into politics, drawing a series of analogies between theological and political–legal categories. For him, there is a structural similarity between the absolute authority of God and the absolute authority of the sovereign; similarly, the 'state of exception' – in which the legal constitution is suspended by the sovereign's decision – is akin to the God's miracle that suspends the laws of nature. By highlighting these parallels, Schmitt is not so much reflecting on the persistence of religion in politics but, rather, on the place of transcendence left vacant by the collapse of the theological order in the sixteenth century and the way that secular political concepts of the state have subsequently struggled to fill this void. Religion and theology are present in modernity in the form of their absence, which nevertheless leaves a mark on political experience. As theological authority diminishes, there are a series of displacements and substitutions of its conceptual categories, which find their way into the historical understanding of sovereignty and create a place of transcendence that allows a political order to be instituted. However, this way of thinking becomes increasingly impossible in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which Schmitt characterizes as the age of immanence, bourgeois individualism and technological nihilism, where the world comes to coincide entirely with itself and there is no longer space for transcendence, in either a theological or political sense.[18]

However, while Schmitt claims to be simply proposing a 'sociology of concepts' as a way of exploring the historical genealogy of the modern state, following his 'teacher' Max Weber, Schmitt's political theology is an attempt to respond to the ongoing crises of legitimacy that beset the Weimar Republic in the 1920s,[19] as well as to the broader problem of the absence of transcendental sources of authority in secular liberal modernity. His solution is an authoritarian, decisionist form of sovereignty with the power to suspend the constitutional order, that 'decides on the exception'[20] – that is, which determines the conditions of what constitutes an existential threat to the state and the emergency measures to be taken to respond to this crisis, including a constitutional

dictatorship and the triggering of Article 48 and the Enabling Act, later used by the Nazis to declare a state of emergency. Schmitt's 'solution', notoriously, coincided with his own support for and involvement in the Nazi regime some years later. His concept of the legal state of exception – which he sees as the very existential core of sovereignty – emerges as part of a complex debate with positive law theorists like Hans Kelsen and Hugo Krabbe and liberal legal constitutional scholars like Hugo Preuss, which sought to equate the state with the law and to rein in the sovereign exception through constitutional rules. According to Schmitt, such approaches denied the true nature of sovereignty as a liminal or 'borderline' concept, one whose exceptionality in relation to the law was the guarantee of the law's totality and consistency. Sovereignty therefore has an existential or extra-ordinary dimension that grounds the law and serves as its point of application. As Schmitt puts it:

> The exception is more interesting than the rule. The rule proves nothing; the exception proves everything. It confirms not only the rule but also its existence, which derives only from the exception. In the exception the power of real life breaks through the crust of a mechanism that has become torpid by repetition.[21]

According to Schmitt, in order to fulfil this role, sovereignty must take on a kind of theological illumination, giving itself God-like powers. As a radical Hobbesian, Schmitt wanted to create a modern Leviathan, a new mortal God that would tower over society and unilaterally determine law.[22] Central to Schmitt's political theology is a kind of secular political absolutism or even monotheism.[23] Schmitt's political theology thus provided the political and legal architecture for the realization of the Nazi totalitarian state.

Towards an alternative paradigm

While Schmitt's account of political theology serves as the touchstone and usual point of departure for subsequent investigations into political theology,[24] we think that it provides a limited and highly reductionist model that is restricted to a narrowly institutional (and juridical) account of politics. How, then, might the theo-logic of contemporary political orders be thought differently? Since Schmitt's time, political theology, as a field of investigation, has become considerably broadened and diversified. It has largely moved away from Schmitt's sovereign-centric and authoritarian suppositions and has come to embrace a range of different perspectives. After the Second World War, and in the light of Auschwitz and the failures of the totalitarian state – and indeed the collaboration of the Catholic Church and some Protestant churches with National Socialism – Schmitt's conservative brand of political theology came in for criticism from theological quarters, namely on the grounds that it itself was a 'political religion' that had little to do with any genuine Christian theology.[25] To think of political theology beyond merely a justification for the sovereign state, and to take it in more emancipatory directions, points to its malleability as a concept. Indeed, we would argue that political theology can be better thought of as a *method*, rather than a doctrine, for tracing different and dynamic expressions of theo-logic by employing theological categories, ideas and modes of thinking to interpret a range of (post)secular phenomenon: from the operation of the market,[26] to the impact of

technology,[27] the boundaries of the secular and non-secular,[28] the role of the church in public life,[29] the environmental crisis,[30] as well as new social movements for racial and climate justice.[31] Theology informs types of political advocacy that – because they foreground the presence of an extraordinary or sacred dimension – are radically disruptive of the social and political orders. In other words, political theology always has the potential for a radical *recontestation* of political space.

This alternative rendering of political theology was already prefaced by post-war theologians, particularly in Germany, who put forwards more radical interpretations, better adapted to the modern secular, plural and democratic age – a reality that was officially acknowledged by the Catholic Church in the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. For instance, the 'liberation theology' of Johann Baptist Metz,[32] as well as Latin American theologians like Leonardo Boff and Gustavo Gutiérrez[33] drew on Marxist theory and the philosophy of the Frankfurt School to develop a form of political theology that spoke to movements of resistance, emancipation and social justice, particularly in the Global South.

The political theology of J-B Metz is based on the historical memory of suffering, the *memoria passionis*, reminding us of Christ's suffering. A mutual acknowledgement of human suffering becomes the basis of a universal ethical standpoint. This also involves a form of obedience, but, for Metz, this is an obedience to the authority of *those who suffer*, not to the authority of the sovereign state. This mutual recognition of human suffering is the only adequate ethical response to a 'global community in which world politics increasingly loses its primacy to world economics whose laws of the market were long ago abstracted from "human beings" themselves.'[34]

Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann developed a form of eschatological Christian theology based on the idea of hope embodied in Christ's resurrection – one that was also strongly influenced by Critical Theory and theologies of liberation. Central to Moltmann's political theology is the role of organized religion in the critique of political power and institutionalized authority, and it is this guiding ethos that is key to a new kind of resistant political pluralism. What makes Moltmann particularly relevant here is that he develops a distinct political or public theology radically opposed to that of Schmitt. According to Moltmann, a new kind of political theology had developed, based on renewing the vocation of the church as a critical political voice in society: 'In this way it places itself in the history of the impact of Christianity on politics, which means the desacralization of the state, the relativization of forms of political order, and the democratization of political decisions.'[35]

According to Moltmann, Christianity must assert its political existence, as part of this new political theology, by maintaining a critical distance from both society and the state. It resists any kind of incorporation into, or alliance with, the state. Rather, its role is to radically dissociate from the state to condemn its abuses of power and thereby contribute towards a democratization and pluralization of society. At the same time, Christianity should be something more than a privatized belief system that fits in with the existing social order without challenging it. Moltmann refers to the Exodus Church as being in a sense at home *nowhere*. In adopting this stance, the church could enter into alliance with civil society and support secular political causes and struggles for emancipation. Yet, this newfound public and political role for the church simply means remaining faithful to the core principles of Christianity – those of social justice, defined by the Sermon on the

Mount. Moltmann's political theology, in its call for the de-privatization of Christianity, for it to play a more prominent and critical role in public life, goes beyond the liberal model of the strictly secular public sphere.

Central to this new political theology, in its various articulations, is therefore a different relationship between the theological and political. While Schmitt drew structural parallels between theological and juridico-political categories to justify an authoritarian form of state sovereignty, new political theologians have tended to argue for a greater prominence of theology in politics, but in a way that is compatible with secular and democratic society, and which works in solidarity with social justice movements. In arguing for a more active role for church organizations in public life, the new political theology can be characterized as 'public theology'.[36] We see this public theology in action when, for instance, Church of England leaders – including the Archbishop of Canterbury – speak out on political issues, such as child poverty or the government's treatment of refugees and asylum seekers. Theologian Graham Ward describes the increasingly public, political role of the church as 'postmaterialist' in the sense that it is 'critical of a purely material understanding of objects, activities, and values.'[37] According to Ward, this attitude of a church active *in* the world, although not *of* the world, points to a political theology based on post-materialist values and politically engaged citizenship: 'And so the politics of Christian living in the world both reflects and critiques the values, emphases, and trajectories of its histories, its societies, its cultures, its languages, its ideologies.'[38]

It is in the light of this more expansive conception of political theology – where a theo-logic is traced among numerous forms of radical political activity and critical engagement with forms of power – that we detect a method of enquiry to supplement the study of political ideologies.

A radical politics of redemption

By attending to the neglect of objects and principles that occupy a sacred place within secular life – nature, human rights, equality and so on – post-Schmittian approaches to political theology elaborate on what we would call a radical politics of redemption that cuts across established secular ideological boundaries. Because they were formulated at a time when 'progressive' social movements were displacing traditional democratic politics by critiquing power and domination in the name of human rights, the political theologies discussed above can help us find resemblances with various, recent 'post-ideological' formations, despite their obvious differences. Many of the latter are also radically critical of secular institutions, mobilize primarily on a civil terrain against power and elites and do not fit easily into established ideological constellations of left–right. Their adoption of apparently religious motifs and practices suggests that they, too, function as instances of political theology aimed not at reinforcing or simply extending established ideological boundaries but at contesting them by invoking a sense of the extraordinary.

What do we mean by a radical politics of redemption? We use this phrase to characterize forms of discourse that (1) alert people to the loss or decline of a fundamental, existential (or sacred) condition on which collective life depends and whose absence reveals a profound existential threat; (2) advocate, in response, for the

redemption of that loss by a radical reorientation of political existence as a whole to a sacred source conceived as immanent to it, expelling the causes of its corruption and (3) invite a form of political practice that instantiates the re-moralization of secular existence, presenting itself as the exemplar of a renewed moral force. Doubtless, many modern political ideologies express aspects of this redemptive politics. Yet, whereas these tended to absorb the force of redemption into elaborate programmes of state and highly conceptual frames, thereby postponing redemption to a distant future, political theology urgently foregrounds this threefold redemptive approach as the *very purpose and substance* of politics.

The centrality of redemption therefore sets these formations apart from established ideological systems, allowing for a looser, more flexible and critical relation to political concepts and principles. Rather than promoting a complex formation of ideas, contemporary political theologies operate largely on the margins of such constellations where they can challenge ideological boundaries and associations. Redemption magnifies the presence of an existential threat and draws other concepts into the urgent need to counter that threat. We suggest that the three components noted earlier point to three related manoeuvres in this type of discourse albeit present to different degrees in any instance:

- *Identification of an existential threat*: what gives these discourses a distinctly theological flourish – even when they are not especially religious – is their hyperbolic fixation on a privileged object or principle that is seen to be under threat, rather than a list of discrete demands or a comprehensive programme of government. These objects and principles are presented as the unconditional basis to a common life as such, for example, the 'people', nature, sovereignty, justice or freedom. Unlike settled ideological constellations, which mediate a variety of demands and make their achievement a matter of approximation, political theology attributes certain ideas to absolute status. Their imminent, or actual, loss represents a profound threat that diminishes all other issues. In that respect, they function less as normal political concepts (which can articulate with other concepts) and more as images of the sacred that are set above all other principles and demands. They are attributed to homogeneity and, because essential to collective existence, vulnerability to corruption that exceeds normal political contest.
  Of course, all political ideologies privilege certain concepts and even grant them a certain sacred status, and often these ideologies themselves have theological roots. But redemptive political theologies avoid compromising such principles, treating them as existential conditions beyond debate. As such, they signal self-evident truths yet to be fully recognised, and thus the focus of commitment and fidelity rather than policy. The sacred 'aura' of these principles is employed as itself a criticism of power and domination, or what Moltmann sees as the critique of 'idols' – the false gods mistakenly promoted by the powerful (for example, multiculturalism, international cooperation, or the free market). Political theologies work to critically de-sacralise power by exposing its violation of a higher order condition treated as sacred.
- *Suffering as revelation*: the critical force of existential threats draws from the lived experience of suffering. For a redemptive theology, evidence of suffering – in the form of overt violence or ecological destruction, for example – reveals a violated sacrality. Unlike individuated social 'problems' that can be solved through policy

measures, a redemptive politics relies on the disclosure of a total negating force that must be expelled in its entirety. Suffering conjures a profound sense of incompleteness, the failure to realize what is universally good. What is sacred in suffering is not expressed as an all-powerful, exceptional sovereign (as per Schmitt) but – on the contrary – as weakness and vulnerability.[39] Weakness – in the form of the downtrodden, the marginalized, forgotten 'ordinary folks' – manifests a virtuous force that negates arbitrary power, exposes its self-serving character and its blindness to its own effects. It is crucial, then, that theologies of redemption draw upon this experience of suffering as part of their politics.

- *Communion as a moral force*: a redemptive theological politics addresses its supporters as a community of faith, united not by formal arguments but by a deeper, ethical sense of communion or solidarity. Moral urgency and subjective attachment are often expressed collectively in communications, protests and marches that present as an intensity of feeling. This, often participatory and affective, mode of politics underscores an opposition between ordinary people and elites, presented in the form of stand-offs with law and order or public confrontations, as we have seen, for instance, in certain ritualized forms of protest and civil disobedience, whether in movements for racial and climate justice or against gender-based violence. Personal sacrifice (if only symbolic through public exposure, civil transgression or formal arrest) is valued as a marker of authentic commitment and as an indication of the urgency of the cause. Action – whether in the form of repeated slogans, gestures of expressed faith and/or physical performances – serves to instantiate (rather than merely 'represent') the redeeming moral force that will restore the threatened loss.

These broad, interconnected themes provide an initial framework for exploring ideological formations as instances of political theology, that is, as discourses structured around the redemption of sacred sources of power in secular politics. While many religious ideologies fit this framework well, the implication of political theology is that non-religious movements make comparable claims and appeal to similar motifs in relation to otherwise secular demands. That does not mean they are religious in motivation. Rather, it implies the adoption of a certain *theological form* to their politics. Where established ideological formations can draw on a rich variety of intellectual arguments and nuanced concepts to elaborate and defend their positions, a redemptive politics often turns to a great extent on its flexible organization of passions around perceived grievances and injustices. Strong ideological baggage might be seen as a hindrance to this kind of politics, which often benefits from the simplicity and immediacy of its message, and the capacity to polarize debate and clearly identify adversaries. In some respects, this can be understood as a technique of revitalizing existing ideologies by narrowing the frame of attention. For example, instances of conspiratorial thinking are found on the margins of most political ideologies (such as in right- and left-wing extremism), where they serve to reinforce given diagnoses of modern society and its ills by collapsing conceptual distinctions to 'reveal' the malign influence of secret powers. On the other hand, a redemptive theology can form outside established ideological paradigms, appropriating conceptual elements from various sources to produce a new formation. A redemptive politics is therefore not bound by the traditional distinction between

'right' and 'left' (or conservative and progressive). Because they are motivated to disrupt the established ideological horizon, their appeal arguably lies in a capacity to evade capture by dominant paradigms, which are often viewed as 'compromised' by profane powers. Redemptive politics can therefore be both more-or-less on the left or right but also outside that division depending on which concepts, experiences and audiences it makes appeal to.

It might be more appropriate to see redemptive politics as a certain type of ideological strategy or mode of ideological re-contestation, rather than as a coherent ideology. Emerging at the margins of dominant ideological forms or in the gaps where such ideologies have failed to maintain influence, a redemptive politics capitalizes on an expanding 'spiritual' disillusion with politics and political institutions in general. It magnifies this disillusion as an existential threat, not just a failure in policy, thereby contesting political space as such. These strategies can inflect numerous forms of ideology with a mode of critique that can be highly affective (in their attention to loss, suffering and communion) but also ethically refreshing, calling into question the basic purposes and limits of secular power and providing a platform from which to resist ideological co-optation into normal politics.

Populism and political theology

Thus far, we have sketched the analytical insights of political theology, understood as a practice of tracing the signs of the sacred in secular politics, and we have set out, generally, how we think these insights pertain to 'redemptive' strategies increasingly visible in contemporary politics. However, it might help to return to our opening observations concerning 'post-ideological' formations in order, briefly, to illustrate the point.

To understand how these 'post-ideological' elements play out in contemporary forms of politics, we can take the global example of 'populism'. Its notorious slipperiness and vagueness as a concept suggests that it cannot be grasped in strictly ideological terms,[40] and might be better understood as a form of political theology.[41] Indeed, populism can be seen as a way of conveying the experience of the 'extraordinary' in politics – in other words, moments of enchantment and exceptions that go beyond the practice of 'politics as usual'.[42] As Margaret Canovan argued in her well-known analysis of the 'two faces of democracy', populism represents, or seeks to represent, the redemptive, salvific face of democracy, in opposition to its more mundane, pragmatic, procedural face.[43] It is symptomatic of the tension internal to democracy between this idealistic, passionate dimension – expressed in the romantic idea of popular sovereignty and the will of the people – and the more technocratic, institutional aspect which is concerned with real-world problem-solving. The gap between democracy's message of salvation – the idea that the will of the people should prevail – and the actual realities of power, between promises made and promises broken, usually leads to disenchantment, a disenchantment that populists exploit. In promising to give the people 'what they really want' – in contrast to the mainstream political establishment, which, mired in technocratic and bureaucratic complexity, is unable or unwilling to carry out the wishes of the people – populism offers a 're-enchantment' of democracy, claiming to restore its central message of redemption

and hope. In this sense, populism might be understood as a kind of secularized messianism.

Indeed, populism can be said to combine all the elements of the 'theo-political' logic we have identified. First, populist discourses construct themselves around *existential threats*. The sacred figure of 'the people', whom populist leaders claim to represent and defend, are always seen to be threatened by nefarious forces, whether these are the globalizing political, economic or cultural elites, who have allegedly sold out the national interest or who have undermined traditional values and identity through their support for open borders, multiculturalism or the 'woke' agenda. Or the existential threat could come from immigrants themselves, who threaten to erode national cultural identity, are a burden on the welfare state and pose a risk to the economic livelihood of citizens. In the case of right-wing populism, in particular, immigration, particularly from Islamic countries, presents an existential threat to the European Christian identity and has fed into many conspiracy theories about 'Eurabia'.[44] Other minorities – sexual, cultural – are seen to threaten traditional patriarchal roles and gender identities. The threat could even come in the form of Covid vaccine rollouts, which are said to be part of a global conspiracy orchestrated by the World Health Organization. The particular form that the existential threat takes does not really matter; what is important, in populist discourse, is the immanent sense of crisis and emergency, which demands strong, decisive sovereign action – in the Schmittian sense – that should not be hampered by the procedural checks and balances, legality and human rights concerns that characterize politics as usual. Populism mobilizes 'crisis narratives' as a way of galvanizing political constituencies through generations of fear, anxiety and insecurity[45]; undermining trust in government and established political institutions and accentuating political division and ideological polarization.

Secondly, populism foregrounds the idea of suffering and victimization – what we have identified as *suffering as revelation*. As a result of these crises and existential threats, the people suffer. In populist discourse, the 'the people' is a kind of sacred community, morally pure, but at the same time downtrodden and betrayed by the liberal globalist establishment. The 'people' are always vulnerable to the manipulations of the elites and/or the minorities which erode their identity and threaten their war of life. This is part of what Jan-Werner Müller describes as a 'moralistic imagination of politics', the Manichean narrative central to populism, in which the 'good people' are pitted against the 'corrupt elites'.[46] Therefore, the suffering of the people must be redeemed by the leader. Only the leader who speaks for 'the people' can feel their pain and understand their suffering. There is a strong spiritual investment in the leader as a messiah-like figure who can relieve their suffering. Yet, as a messiah, the leader is also one who, as Carlos de La Torre argues,[47] must also be seen to suffer for his or her people. The populist leader – the one who is both of the people and yet transcends them – offers the promise of salvation and redemption. He (or she) is the one who 'knows how they feel', who shares their values, who expresses their true inclinations and defends their interests, who can deliver what they truly desire and who is not afraid to transgress the established norms and practices of politics in doing so.

Finally, populism is a politics of communion – what we have referred to as, *communion as moral force*. 'The people', in the populist imagination, stands for more than the population (on the contrary, it is always an exclusionary concept that does not include

certain types of people). Rather, 'The people' is a sacred community, usually embodied in a nation with a homogeneous cultural or ethnic identity and shared values, rituals and practices. The 'people' is similar to a community of religious believers, closely bound together through a shared sense of identity and solidarity and a loyalty to their leader. That is why the support for Trump resembled something like a religious cult, with Trump once boasting that he could shoot someone in broad daylight and still claim the loyalty and support of his followers. Central here is the idea of sacrifice. Followers of populist movements see personal sacrifice as a sign of loyalty and authentic commitment to a common cause. Populist movements, as distinct from mainstream political parties, invite a stronger sense of belonging and solidarity, as they are regard themselves as outside the political system and engaged in a pitched battle against 'the establishment' that seeks to exclude them.

Of course, populism is just one example of theo-politics of redemption that we see all around us in the post-secular political space. A similar analysis could be applied to climate justice movements like Extinction Rebellion (and its various iterations like Insulate Britain and Just Stop Oil). These also mobilize narratives of crisis and existential threat (the climate emergency and human extinction[48]), embody ideas of suffering (of natural ecosystems and non-human species) and invite a strong sense of communion, belonging and solidarity (with nature), including forms of civil disobedience and protest (which often involve religious rituals[49]) and acts of personal sacrifices (such as getting arrested).

Conclusion

We have argued that political theology, as a distinctive mode of analysis, can advance the understanding of political ideologies by shifting the focus of attention to variegated experiences of the sacred on the edges of ideological discourse. We have suggested that registering the sacred and its presence in public life radically recontests the political field, unsettling its discursive boundaries and opening it up to diverse experiences of suffering and communion and to broader ethical and existential questions. These are elements not easily captured within existing ideological categories, yet they can be found in numerous contemporary phenomena and are becoming increasingly prominent in political life today.

In developing this understanding of 'political theology as method', we first distinguished it from political religions, in which the element of the sacred is used to legitimize a certain secular order of power and authority. By contrast, we argued that political theology can have more radical and unpredictable effects: the exposure of the secular political order to theological ways of thinking can just as easily lead to critical reflection and even to emancipatory forms of politics that radically question authority in the name of a greater justice. Post-Schmittian approaches to political theology, in particular, offer an initial template for understanding a new theological politics connecting the sacred to diverse experiences and struggles with power. But this theological politics can also be detected in a multiplicity of more recent political phenomena, which we have characterized generally as a radical politics of redemption.

Taking up the perspective of political theology, then, should not be mistaken for an endorsement of all post-secular and 'post-ideological' political formations – some are challenging, incomplete and contradictory and in some cases downright dangerous. They can be progressive and emancipatory in some contexts and reactionary and exclusionary in others, especially when they intersect with the politics of right-wing identitarianism and ethno-nationalism. Nonetheless, a political-theological politics reopens the question of what it is that should be regarded as sacred, where a community's 'ultimate' values lie, and that invites analysts to examine how such a question becomes the medium of ideological innovation and contest. As the example of populism demonstrates, it is increasingly formations such as these that are driving new forms of activism, provoking public debate and challenging established political ideologies to respond. Conceived as a supplement to ideological analysis, political theology usefully poses the problem of how ideas, concepts and arguments respond not just to the moral demands and practical challenges of managing the modern state but also to the extraordinary experiences that keep citizens invested in the polity as such.

Notes

1. See C. Mudde and C. R. Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
2. See B. Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Style and Representation* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).
3. M. Freeden, *Ideology Studies: New Advances and Interpretations* (London and New York: Routledge, 2022), p. 27.
4. See H. Maier, 'Political religion: a concept and its limitations', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 8: 1 (2007), pp. 5–16; D. K. Gates and P. Steane, 'Political religion – the influence of ideological and identity orientation', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 10: 3–4 (2009), pp. 303–325; and R. Shorten, 'The status of ideology in the return of political religion theory'. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 12: 2 (June 2007) pp. 163–187. The term political religion was used by Eric Voegelin in the 1930s to refer to the way that ideologies like Fascism and National Socialism employed religious motifs, symbols, ideas and narratives, thus coming to resemble secular religions. They bore a deep affinity, he argued, with religious modes of thinking, revealing the way that modern secular societies retained an underlying religious belief structure. In totalitarian movements, Voegelin detected the same desire for spiritual communion, transcendence and salvation. They employed the apocalyptic narratives of religion and sacralized certain concepts like the state, nation and, in the case of National Socialism, race. 'The people', or the national community, became a new form of religious community, and its will is embodied in the figure of the Leader, to whom the same messianic hopes are attached. See E. Voegelin, *Modernity without Restraint. The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Volume 5*. Ed., Manfred Henningsen (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000). A similar argument is made by the historian of fascism Emilio Gentile. E. Gentile, 'Political religion: a concept and its critics – a critical survey', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 6:1 (2005), pp. 19–32.
5. S. Newman, *Political Theology: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).
6. See J. Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

7. See C. Lefort, 'The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?' in H. De Vries and L. E. Sullivan (Eds), *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006) 148–87, p. 150.
8. See H. De Vries and L. E. Sullivan, Ed., *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, ed. by H. De Vries and L. E. Sullivan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 148–87, p. 150.
9. See J. Habermas, 'Notes on post-secular society, *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25: 4, 2008: 17–29); J. Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).
10. See. C. Laborde and A. Bardon (Eds) *Religion in Liberal Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); P. Losonczi and A. Singh (Eds) *From Political Theory to Political Theology: Religious Challenges and the Prospects of Democracy* (London and New York: Continuum, 2010).
11. H. Wydra, *Politics and the Sacred* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 3.
12. *Ibid*., p. 10.
13. See R. A. Yelle, *Sovereignty and the Sacred: Secularism and the political Economy of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).
14. C. Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, trans. by G. L. Ulmen (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996).
15. C. Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europeaum*, trans., G. L. Ulmen (New York: Telos Press, 2006).
16. C. Schmitt, *Political Theology II: The Myth of the Closure of any Political Theology*, trans., M. Hoelzl and G. Ward (Cambridge: Polity, 2008).
17. C. Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. by G. Schwab (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 36.
18. C. Schmitt, 'The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations', trans., M. Konzen and J. P. McCormick, in *The Concept of the Political*, trans. by G. Schwab (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 80–96.
19. This is covered extensively in D. Dyzenhaus, *Legality and Legitimacy: Carl Schmitt, Hans Kelsen and Herman Heller in Weimar* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), L. Vinx, *Guardian of the Constitution: Hans Kelsen and Carl Schmitt on the Limits of Constitutional Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
20. Schmitt's definition of the sovereign is 'he who decides on the exception'. See *Political Theology*, p. 1.
21. *Ibid*., p. 15.
22. This is made clear in Schmitt's discussion of the political theology of Hobbes' Leviathan, in which it is argued that Hobbes gives us a decisionist theory of sovereignty (see Schmitt 1996).
23. This was the basis of Erik Peterson's critique of Schmitt, who queried the theological basis for Schmitt's monotheistic account of sovereignty, arguing that it was incompatible with the Christian Trinitarian doctrine and accusing Schmitt of a kind of political heresy. E. Peterson, *Theological Tractates*, Ed. and trans. by M. J. Hollerich (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).
24. See, for instance, P. W. Kahn, *Political Theology: Four New Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).
25. See Jürgen Moltmann's critique of Schmitt in J. Moltmann *God for a Secular Society: The Public Relevance of Theology*, trans., M. Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1999).
26. See G. Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans., Lorenzo Chiesa (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2011); D. Leshem, *The Origins of Neoliberalism: Modelling the Economy from Jesus to Foucault* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); E. Stimilli, *The Debt of the Living: Ascesis and Capitalism*, trans., A. Bove (New York: SUNY Press, 2017).
27. See D. Bates, 'The Political theology of entropy: a Katechon for the cybernetic age', *History of the Human Sciences*, 33: 1 (2020), pp. 109–127. N. Guilhot, 'Automatic Leviathan: cybernetics and politics in Carl Schmitt's post-war writings', *History of the Human Sciences*, 33: 1

(2020), pp. 128–146. See also Moltmann's concerns about biotechnology and genetic engineering in J. Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society: The Public Relevance of Theology*, trans., M. Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1999), p. 100.

28. See de Vries and Sullivan, *Political Theologies*. See also J. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).
29. See L. E Cady, *Religion, Theology and American Public Life* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1993).
30. See M. S. Northcott, *A Political Theology of Climate Change* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013); B. Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, trans., C. Porter (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017); C. Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); C. Crockett and C. Keller (Eds) *Political Theology on Edge: Ruptures of Justice and Belief in the Anthropocene* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021).
31. See J. Miller, *Resisting Theology, Furious Hope: Secular Political Theology and Social Movements* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); J. H. Kidwell, 'Re-enchanting political theology', *Religions 10*, 550 (2019), pp. 1–14; and C. Crockett and C. Keller (Eds) *Political Theology on Edge: Ruptures of Justice and Belief in the Anthropocene* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021).
32. J. B. Metz, J. B. *Passion for God: The Mystical Political Dimension of Christianity*, trans. by J. M. Ashley (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1998).
33. G. Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, *15th edn*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998).
34. See J-B Metz, 'In the pluralism of religious and cultural worlds: notes toward a theological and political paradigm', trans., J. Downey and H. Wiggers, *Crosscurrents* 49: 2 (Summer 1999), pp. 227–236.
35. Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society*, 44.
36. E. Graham, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Public Theology in a Post-secular Age* (London: SCM Press, 2013); S. Kim and K. Day (Eds) *A Companion to Public Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).
37. G. Ward, *The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens* (Grand Rapids Michigan: Baker Academic, 2009), p. 32.
38. *Ibid*., p. 23.
39. See J. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: Theology of the Event* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2006).
40. Indeed, Michael Freeden argues that populism cannot even be considered a 'thin-centred' ideology: 'populism displays a slightly different trait. It not only falls short of comprehensiveness but short of nuanced specificity in what it *does* offer. Vagueness and indeterminacy may be good vote-catchers, but the result is at best a phantom ideology, a spectre that can be draped over pressing and intricate socio-political issues in order to blur and to conceal.' See Freeden, *op. cit*, p. 168.
41. See A. Arato, 'Political theology and populism', *Social Research* 80: 1 (Spring 2013), pp. 143–172. This is aside from the way that many forms of ethno-nationalist or right-wing populism explicitly mobilize religious themes and images in their narrative, particularly the idea of defending a certain religious identity or heritage, associated with a homogeneous cultural, ethnic, national community, against the threat posed by immigration from alien cultures – for instance, the use of the 'Great Replacement' narrative and the perceived need to defend European Christian identity against the influence of Islam. Whether this reflects a genuine religious affinity or a deliberate manipulation of religious themes by populists to galvanize political support, the point is that populism draws on religion and politicizes it. See here A. Arato and J. L Cohen, 'Civil society, populism and religion', *Constellations* 24 (2017), pp. 283–295; U. Schmiedel and J. Ralston, Eds, *The Spirit of Populism: Political Theologies in Polarized Times* (Leiden: Brill Academic, 2021).

42. See C. de la Torre, 'Populism and the politics of the extraordinary in Latin America', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 21: 2 (2016), pp. 121–139.
43. M. Canovan, 'Trust the People! Populism and the two faces of democracy', *Political Studies*, 47: 1 (1999), pp. 2–16. See also F. Carriera da Silva and M. Brito Vieira, 'Populism and the politics of redemption', *Thesis Eleven*, 149: 1, pp. 10–30.
44. See E. Bergmann, *Conspiracy and Populism: The Politics of Misinformation* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).
45. See P. J Maher, A. Lüders, E. Erisen, M. Rooduijn, E. M. Jonas, 'The Many Guises of Populism and Crisis: Introduction to the Special Issue on Populism and Global Crises', *Political Psychology*, 43: 5 (2022).
46. J-W Müller, *What is Populism?* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).
47. C. de la Torre, 'Populism and the politics of the extraordinary in Latin America'.
48. See S. D. Skrimshire, Activism for End Times: Millenarian belief in an age of climate emergency. *Political Theology* 20: 6 (2019), pp. 518–536; D. Rothe, Governing the End Times? Planet politics and the secular eschatology of the Anthropocene. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 48: 2 (2020), pp. 143–164; and Wallace McNeish, 'From Revelation to Revolution: Apocalypticism in Green Politics', *Environmental Politics* 26: 6 (2017), pp. 1035–1054.
49. See J. H. Kidwell, 'Re-enchanting political theology', *Religions* 10: 550 (2019), pp. 1–14;

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