

CHAPTER 29

State and Civil Society

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The temptation is to approach the topic of the state and civil society from the vantage point of the various currents of theological thought that since the mid-1960s have been identified as "political theology." The task would then be to examine the ways these theologies have both interpreted those political realities and construed Christianity's relation to them. But, as other essays in this volume suggest, the question of Christian political engagement precedes the birth of the contemporary theological movements collectively known as "political theology." Indeed, as the proponents of several strands of political theology remind us, all theology is always already political. Expanding upon this insight, this essay begins with an understanding of "the political" and "politics" in the broadest sense. Politics and the designation "political" do not in the first instance refer to the machinations and deceptions of state and party officials, but to the social arrangement of bodies, the organization of human communities (the root meaning of "polity" or "politics"). Moreover, intrinsic to this organization, to politics, is an act of imagination. Although always concerned with the arrangement of bodies, every politics involves the (re)production of a vision, a *mythos*, of community.

This insight provides our entrée to the theological and, in particular, to political theology. To assert that every theology is always already political is to recognize that every theology embodies, either implicitly or explicitly, a *mythos*, a vision of how human communities ought to be organized. As Carl Schmitt (1888–1985), a rather notorious forerunner of contemporary political theology, recognized early in the twentieth century, theological concepts and images have political correlates. (See chapter 8 by Michael Hollerich in this volume.) Of course, the recognition of the political impact of the theological, and of the Christian *mythos* in particular, has roots that extend much deeper than the early twentieth century. In the history of Christian thought it finds one of its earliest and most profound articulations in Augustine's *City of God*. There the political

theology of Rome is subjected to a theological critique, the heart of which is Augustine's claim that such a theology cannot bestow salvation, for salvation is found at the altar of another city, the city of God (See chapter 3 by Jean Bethke Elshtain in this volume.)

Given that all theology is always already political, to address the issue of the state and civil society in political theology beginning with political theology's contemporary manifestations is to commence the story too late. This is the case, however, not because the history of Christian political engagement is much older, for actually the history of Christian engagement with what we recognize as "the state" and "civil society" is not *that* much older than contemporary political theology. Rather, the concern is a theological one. This is to say, if the treatment of these matters is to be particularly theological – that is, governed by norms and modalities of judgment anchored in the Christian *mythos* instead of in the *mythos* of modern social science or political philosophy – then we are compelled to initiate our tale just prior to the advent of "the state" and "civil society." For, as we will see, to begin the conversation once the state and civil society have been ensconced in our imaginations such that they have attained the status of a "given," such that they appear as simply "facts," is to have acquiesced, perhaps unknowingly, in a crucial theological judgment regarding the character of Christianity's political presence in the world.

There are a number of ways one could treat the similarities and differences that characterize the approaches of the sundry forms of contemporary political theology to the state and civil society. The popular imagination might suggest that the truly important differences lie along the axes determined by such categories as liberal and (neo)conservative, greens and laborites, capitalists and socialists, and so forth. As a distinctly theological reading, advanced in the spirit of Augustine, the axis of judgment in this essay is at once soteriological, eschatological, ecclesiological: What are the theological presuppositions that underwrite contemporary political theologies? What do their visions of the state and civil society say about the nature and mission of the church, the nature of God's activity in history, the character of salvation? What is the proper political correlate of the Christian *mythos*?

Such an analysis suggests that the proponents of three prominent strands of political theology – political theology proper, Latin American liberation theology, and public theology – for all of their important differences, nevertheless are in substantial agreement concerning the nature of Christian engagement with such political realities as the state and civil society. I identify these strands as collectively constituting the dominant tradition of Christian political theology today. While no single movement currently exerts hegemonic influence over the field of contemporary theological reflection, nevertheless, taken together these movements embody what is unquestionably the dominant paradigm for conceiving of political theology today. By way of contrast, I then present what may be labeled an "emergent tradition." This emergent tradition may loosely be called "postliberal." In theological parlance, such a designation usually refers to certain methodological moves associated with the likes of Alasdair MacIntyre

and George Lindbeck. Here the emphasis is upon the political difference such moves engender in the work of several prominent theologians typically identified as postliberal.

The Advent of the Modern State and Civil Society

As suggested previously, to approach the state and civil society from the vantage point of a present where those realities have attained normative standing is to foreclose consideration of a crucial theological judgment regarding the character of Christianity's political presence and thus to conceal the determinative division in political theology today. Toward the end of illuminating both that judgment and that divide, this section presents a brief genealogy of the modern state and civil society that highlights contrasting interpretations of those realities.

In discussions of Christian political engagement, terms like "the state" are often invoked as if they were static realities that have changed little over time. Thus we speak of the early Christian attitude toward the state, or we read Augustine as purveying a theory of the church and state, or we study the medieval theory of church and state. In each of these cases, even as a certain historical fluidity is attributed to the Christian attitude, "the state" is granted a stability that seemingly defies such development and change. It is taken as self-evident that the state is that ensemble of institutions that exercise public authority, enforced through a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. Such a habit of mind, however, reflects the ways our imaginations have been so thoroughly shaped by our contemporary experience of the state; the state so defined is of recent historical vintage. It is the distinctly modern nation-state.

Indeed, it is anachronistic to speak of the church and the state as if these were two distinct social entities prior to the advent of modernity (Ladner 1947). On the contrary, medieval Christendom consisted of a single social body, in which the ecclesial and the civil marked not spatial jurisdictions or even modalities of rule, but ends. Ecclesial authorities were concerned with the supernatural end of human community, while civil authorities concerned themselves with the temporal ends of that same community. Society was an organic whole, governed by two parallel and universal powers – the Pope and the Prince. In fact, when "the state" first appears in general use in political discourse in the fourteenth century, it refers neither to the ruling institutions and apparatuses nor to a geographically bounded space over which princely rule is exerted, but rather to the state or condition of the temporal princes themselves.

The wars of religion and civic peace: Two visions of the state's advent

What is today recognized as "the state," namely a centralized power holding a monopoly on violence within a defined territory, appeared in the midst of the

bloodshed and turmoil that convulsed western Europe over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The standard account of these events and their relation to the rise of the modern nation-state, which is widely repeated not only by historians and political philosophers but by theologians as well, identifies those conflicts as "wars of religion" and attributes to the modern nation-state a veritable redemptive significance insofar as it is commended for delivering us from the bloodshed and brutality of religious disagreement. In the wake of the Reformation, the standard account goes, Catholics and Protestants were locked in conflict and, as religious passion mixed with political power, a bloodbath ensued. Consequently, horrified by the excesses of armed religious fervor, Europe developed a political order whereby religion would no longer have access to the weapons with which to work its woe. Henceforth, religion was construed as a private matter and the public, political realm was to be watched over by a sovereign and secular state charged with keeping the peace.

This particular way of construing social space, dividing it into a public, political sphere presided over by a sovereign state and a private, religious realm is developed with compelling clarity by the German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920), whose work has been tremendously influential in setting the terms for the development of contemporary political theology. Weber embraced the distinction between religion and politics, noting that we inhabit various "livespheres," each of which possesses its own laws and ethical functions. Of course, he noted, to draw this distinction is not to suggest that the realms do not interact. On the contrary, the realms are complementary. In particular, Weber noted that religion was principally about the task of furnishing ideals, whereas politics was fundamentally about the manipulation of means in order to attain, not the ultimate end or ideal, but what was pragmatically possible. Moreover, and of particular interest to us, politics was defined as statecraft. Politics, Weber wrote, is about "the leadership, or the influencing of the leadership, of a *political* association, hence today, of a *state*" (Weber 1946: 77, emphasis in original). As we shall see, Weber's construal of religion as a private, apolitical sphere that serves as a repository of values or ideals that then must be instantiated in the political realm by means of statecraft largely defines the problematic for the dominant tradition of contemporary political theology.

In recent years, the standard account of the advent of the modern state has been challenged on historical and theological grounds. Historically, it has been suggested that the conflicts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are not accurately described as "wars of religion" and that the modern nation-state did not emerge from the fray wearing the mantle of the benign peacekeeper with which it is so frequently adorned, in retrospect, today. According to this counter-reading, these conflicts were not principally instances of interreligious conflict waged between Catholics and Protestants over confessional differences; on the contrary, in the course of these wars Catholics and Protestants frequently fought on the same sides and just as frequently ended up facing one another across the battle lines (Cavanaugh 1995).

That the battle lines do not simply correlate with confessional identities and differences suggests that the conflicts were about more than religious differences, which brings us to the theological challenge to the standard account. Whereas that account holds that the modern state evolved in the aftermath of these conflicts to secure civic peace and deliver us from the cruelties of religious conflict, the alternative account contends that a more accurate theological appraisal, and one that more closely corresponds to the contours of the historical record, is that the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century conflicts were in fact the birth pangs of the modern state as it struggled to break free of the remnants of the medieval order, as it strove to subsume all other social groupings under its sovereign authority. In particular, these conflicts were about the replacement of a public church, which as the font of the virtue *religio* united medieval society, with a sovereign state. In other words, it is as a result not of ecclesial incivility but of an ecclesial defeat at the hands of an ascendant sovereign state that a Weberian world appears, in which the church is shorn of its public, political presence and politics becomes a matter of statecraft. For the emergent tradition of contemporary political theology, it is this theological shift in how the nature and mission of the church are understood that defines the problematic of Christian political engagement.

The taming of Leviathan: The emergence of civil society

Civil society is a middle term of sorts, a semi-public space, classically understood as referring to a mediating realm between the state and the individual, which is inhabited by a host of voluntary associations. It is frequently associated with organizations like the family, neighborhood groupings, the business corporation, and the various social associations with which people voluntarily affiliate. What distinguishes civil society from the state is precisely the voluntary, noncoercive nature of its government. Whereas the realm of the state is ultimately delimited by the (ideally unspoken but always implicit) threat of state violence, civil society is a space of self-government, a space where people associate and interact that is ordinarily free from the threat of state violence and coercion.

With regard to contemporary political theology there are, broadly speaking, two ways of approaching civil society, two models of civil society. According to the dominant model, civil society is fundamentally a space of freedom. Mirroring the presentation of the state as a space of freedom from the inevitably violent political pretensions of religion, this model envisions civil society as a space of freedom (usually understood in terms of pluralism, democracy, and/or a *laissez-faire* market) meant to protect the individual from the totalitarian proclivities of the state. Civil society stands over against the state, restraining it. One could say that it tames Leviathan. According to this vision, civil society is the source of the state's legitimation. The state draws its authority from civil society insofar as it finds its calling in protecting and preserving civil society and draws from that society moral guidance and direction. Weaker versions of this model suggest that

social change is effected when, through the organs of civil society, people influence and guide the state; the state serves as an instrument of the popular will. Stronger, more libertarian versions assert that civil society itself is the locus of social change and that the state's proper function is not to effect change but only to protect civil society and perhaps, in rare circumstances, address certain needs and problems that civil society proves incapable of handling. The church's relationship to civil society varies in this model. Some versions recognize the church as a fully fledged participant in civil society, alongside other voluntary organizations; other versions ignore the church or place it outside the mediating realm of civil society in the realm of the individual.

The alternative reading casts civil society in a decidedly less benign light. Far from establishing a space of freedom, a buffer between the individual and an overweening state, civil society, according to the counter-vision, is understood as essentially a disciplinary space. It is a space where persons are shaped and formed in the state's image, in the image that corresponds to the state's end (which is now increasingly an economic one). Through a vast array of disciplines, learned not at the hands of government officials and bureaucrats, but "voluntarily" through the ministrations of experts, managers, and therapists, people "freely" and gently and, for the most part, willingly find their place in the dominant *mythos*. As such an educative or disciplinary space, civil society is but another species of the power exerted by the state in its victory over the medieval public church. Accordingly, civil society is understood here as a component of Leviathan's taming of society and the church, in particular. This is not to say that civil society is the instantiation of some dark conspiracy led by a monolithic state but rather that civil society, no less than the modern state, is a political correlate of the modern *mythos* about how human communities are organized, a *mythos* that deprives the church of a forthright, concrete political presence. Hence, this model does not embrace civil society as a legitimate space for the church. Stronger versions of this approach tend to cast civil society as intrinsically antithetical to the Christian *mythos*, whereas weaker versions suggest that civil society is not intrinsically but only contingently opposed to the church's proper political presence. That is to say, the weaker version holds out hope that civil society, no less than the modern state, could conceivably coexist peaceably with, and perhaps even serve the mission of, the church.

The Dominant Tradition

As these visions of the state and civil society are incorporated into the various strands of contemporary political theology, they give rise to very different soteriological, ecclesiological, and eschatological convictions regarding the character of Christian political engagement. What I identify as the dominant tradition of contemporary political theology embraces the standard reading of the state and civil society, whereby those institutions are heralded as agents of freedom

while the church is shorn of a concrete political presence in favor of an apolitical or at most only abstractly and generally political presence as a custodian of values. This is to say, the dominant tradition takes as its starting point the modern, Weberian *mythos* of how human community is ordered. Consequently, the fundamental task of political theology becomes the propagation of the values and ideals deemed necessary to sustain and perfect the freedom that appeared with the advent of modernity. This is evident when we consider three of the major strands of contemporary political theology.

Political theology

"Political theology" proper, that movement begun in Germany in the mid-1960s by Johann Baptist Metz, Jürgen Moltmann, and Dorothee Sölle, arose as a reaction against a bourgeois Christianity that had been so thoroughly privatized that it left the social and political status quo unchallenged (Metz 1981). According to these theologians, as a result of its privatization Christianity is rendered effectively irrelevant in a situation where social and political life approaches the brink of barbarism, as evidenced by Auschwitz, the nuclear arms race, the reality of global poverty, and, more recently, ecological devastation (Moltmann 1999). Over against this domesticated Christianity, political theology envisions the church as an institution of "critical freedom." As such it is not the bearer of middle-class consolations, but the herald of an eschatological future that always calls into question the status quo, destabilizing the present in the name of a peace, justice, and freedom to come.

At first glance, it may strike one as odd to suggest that political theology embraces the modern *mythos* of politics as statecraft. After all, one of the hallmarks of political theology is its rejection of the bourgeois privatization of the church that deprives the church of any political influence. However, when it is considered how political theology positions itself in relation to the advent of modernity, it becomes clear that the state and civil society are embraced as the principal agents of social and political change while the church's political presence is reduced to that of a guardian of abstract values. Opposed to what it calls a "traditionalist" theology that resists modernity, political theology is forthrightly and enthusiastically a modern movement (Metz and Moltmann 1995). Indeed, it understands itself to be the theological vision that corresponds to the advance of freedom in the world that went hand in hand with the emergence of the modern West. According to political theology, modernity's emancipation from tradition, the advance of secularization, the Enlightenment, and the rise of the nation-state are all manifestations of a spirit of freedom that infuses history. Of course, political theology is not uncritical in its support of modernity. After all, the freedom that modernity promises has not yet been realized in its fullness—witness the continued struggles against injustice and oppression. Hence, even as they embrace modernity as a stage in the advance of freedom, the political theologians insist that the church function as a permanent critic of any and

every social order in the name of a more just future, in memory of history's victims (Metz 1980).

How the vision of political theology correlates with the modern *mythos* of the state and civil society should be evident. Even as it criticizes the privatized theology of the bourgeois, political theology does not challenge the modern, Weberian vision of how social space is ordered. Politics remains a matter of statecraft and the church, as an institution of permanent critique, is political only in the most general and abstract sense that it announces values that have political consequences, that should inform political engagement in the realm of the state and civil society. Indeed, any attempt to give Christianity a more substantive public or political content – whether by associating Christianity with concrete and specific political programs or suggesting that the church is a public, political formation in its own right that might contest the state's hegemony – is denounced as a pernicious form of “political religion” from which modernity has rightly liberated us (Moltmann 1999). Political theology amounts to the demand, in the name of an eschatological future, that Weber's correlation of religious ideals and political realities be completed. In the writing of political theologians this becomes support for progressive politics, whether associated with social democracy, democratic socialism, or human rights more generally.

Latin American liberation theology

Latin American liberation theology appeared in the late 1960s and gained global attention through the efforts of theologians such as Hugo Assmann, Leonardo Boff, and Gustavo Gutiérrez. Like its northern cousin, Latin American liberation theology arose as a reaction against a Christianity that was too closely wedded to the status quo. In particular, it was a response to a crisis of faith sparked by an irruption of the poor in Latin America, raising their voices against the poverty that inflicted premature death and the programs that inevitably failed to mitigate their plight (Gutiérrez 1988). Against a church that traded in spiritual verities while ignoring the material plight of the masses, the liberationists articulated a vision of the “church of the poor” that proclaimed the good news of God's “preferential option for the poor” by championing the revolutionary cause of justice and the rights of the poor (Sobrinho 1984).

Given that the liberationists are often considered to be among the most politicized of theologians, it is counter-intuitive to suggest they embrace the modern vision of politics as statecraft and cordon off the church in the apolitical realm of values and ideals. Nevertheless, that this is the case is evident in several aspects of their work. Even as they urge the church to opt for the poor, the liberationists are adamant that there can be no return to the era of Christendom, when the church directly wielded political power. In this way, the liberationists are as committed to the freedom modernity brought from the ecclesiastic domination of politics as the political theologians. They too recognize the modern desacralization of politics as a victory in the march of freedom through history

(Gutiérrez 1983). The rise of the secular state, and the clear differentiation of the religious dimension of life from the political and economic realms, are achievements rightly celebrated. Yet, as was the case with the political theologians, the liberationists' embrace of modernity is not uncritical (Gutiérrez 1983; Sobrinho 1984). They too recognize that modernity's freedom has not yet materialized in its fullness. While political freedoms, such as freedom of speech and thought, have largely borne fruit, social and economic freedoms remain elusive. Hence, modernity's promise is incomplete, and the liberationists prod the church to proclaim justice and support those who struggle for it.

This revolutionary vision, notwithstanding the force of its challenge to the current politico-economic order, is firmly grounded in the modern *mythos* of politics as statecraft. Whether one considers their early hopes that the oppressed would seize the state and establish a just social order (then usually identified with some form of socialism) or their more recent turn to civil society in the hope that the voluntary associations located there might influence the state, the liberationists consistently embrace statecraft and accord the church a public presence that can be characterized as political only in the most general and *indirect* sense that it, in true Weberian fashion, fosters the values and ideals that should motivate and guide engagement in secular politics. Any more substantive and directly political presence for the church is rejected as a return to the misguided “politico-religious messianism” of a bygone era (Gutiérrez 1983, 1988).

Public theology

“Public theology” is a broad movement of predominately North American theologians that attained prominence in the latter half of the twentieth century. Although their political views range widely from progressive to conservative, these theologians share a commitment to resisting the sectarian impulses in Christianity that would acquiesce in the disintegration of the moral consensus that has underwritten Western liberal polities for generations. These theologians derive from Christianity a “public philosophy” or “public theology” capable of underwriting the moral consensus necessary to sustain the health and vitality of Western liberal society.

In its Catholic manifestations, for example in the work of Richard John Neuhaus and Michael and Kenneth Himes, public theology is a conscious attempt to continue the project initiated by John Courtney Murray (1904–67) of articulating a “public philosophy” for society. According to the neoconservative Neuhaus, it is Christianity's eschatological vision that provides such a foundation (Neuhaus 1987). That vision is a paradoxical one that even as it holds out the transcendent promise of the kingdom of God, recognizes that such a promise must remain a promise, the gift of a transcendent future, and as such it stands in critical judgment upon every human political program. Such a transcendent critique of all politics finds its political correlate in the “American experiment in ordered liberty” insofar as a democratic and pluralist polity linked to a

free market economy rightly wards off efforts to impose a single social-political vision while nevertheless nurturing what limited good and freedom is realistically attainable now. The Himeses, too, argue that Christianity provides the moral foundation for a pluralist, liberal democratic social order (Himes and Himes 1993). Their version of public theology seeks to deduce the social significance of the central symbols of the Catholic tradition. This is to say, according to their vision of public theology, Christianity provides a worldview or orientation, expressed in such symbols as the Trinity, Incarnation, and Grace, that founds the core values of Western liberalism at its best – desacralized politics, human rights, solidarity, justice and equality, and so forth.

In its Protestant versions, as developed by theologians such as Ronald Thiemann and Max Stackhouse, public theology locates itself in the tradition of Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971), whose career exemplifies the public potential of Christianity, and of theology, in particular. The Lutheran Thiemann develops his vision as a contribution to the effort by Christians to regain a public voice and a sense of public responsibility (citizenship) in a pluralistic culture (Thiemann 1996). Beyond merely finding a voice, however, like his Catholic counterparts Thiemann believes that Christianity can actively contribute to the construction of a new public philosophy for American public life. In particular, he sees Christianity as a fount of the moral renewal of liberal democracy, which in its commitment to freedom, equality, and tolerance reflects values that correspond to the basic convictions and principles of the Christian faith. Because the Christian Gospel entails the recognition of God's enduring presence in the public realm, it is a source of the hope that is crucial to sustaining the effort of pluralistic liberal societies to work for a common human good. For Max Stackhouse, a Reformed theologian, Christianity rightly understood provides the moral and spiritual fiber for Western civilization (Stackhouse 1984). More specifically, Christianity set in motion a historical trajectory that, under the impact of the Protestant Reformation, eventually blossomed in modern liberal democracy, with its limited (and secular) state, flourishing civil society, and abiding commitment to the universal moral law summed up in modern human rights. Starting from the biblical notion of covenant, the Hebrew prophets, and the life and teaching of Jesus, Stackhouse argues that the basic values of Christianity entail pluralism, the separation of powers, ordered freedom, and a broad social space free from coercion where voluntary, self-governing associations can flourish.

In this brief sketch of several of its prominent incarnations, the affinity of public theology for the modern, Weberian *mythos* is readily discernible. In each of these conceptions, politics remains a vision of statecraft. The public theologians share an aversion to the medieval vision of an immediately public and concretely political church as a terrible distortion of the faith. Indeed, they insist that Christianity, rightly understood, is essentially a matter of values, worldviews, or basic orientations from which no specific political agenda can be inferred in any direct and unmediated fashion. Hence, what constitutes the public character of public theology is the insistence that the Weberian correlation be completed. More specifically, the "publicness" of public theology takes

the form of the call for the recognition that Christianity's value-system or vision is necessary for the enduring viability of modern liberal social orders. And at the pinnacle of those social orders, suitably restrained and guided, as these theologians insist, by a vibrant civil society, rests the sovereign state.

Theological synopsis

Earlier I suggested that the most significant division in contemporary political theology was not that between more politically progressive and conservative visions, but rather was fundamentally theological in nature. Important theological judgments underwrite the approaches of the various political theologies to the state and civil society. Ecclesiologically, the dominant tradition consistently portrays the church as an apolitical (or political only in the most general and abstract sense) space that traffics in values and visions; which leaves politics – the concrete arrangement of bodies – to the state. Likewise, the Christian eschatological vision is interpreted either in terms of an *absence* – named "the future" or "promise" by Neuhaus and the political theologians – that impinges upon the present as a permanent critique or in terms of a *presence* – the liberationists' identification of the Spirit in the revolutionary movement of history or Thiemann's sense of providence in liberal democratic processes – that stimulates political responsibility. Soteriologically, the dominant vision endorses the salvific mission of modern politics (recognizing, of course, that this does not exhaust the fullness of salvation, either temporally or eternally). For at least this time between the times, here and now, salvation takes social and political form in the success of statecraft, whether construed in terms of the universal recognition of human rights, the spread of liberal democracy, the strengthening of the "American experiment," or the establishment of some form of democratic socialism. And the church, as the herald of salvation, is called upon to advance that salvation by fostering the (critical) vision and values that undergird the success of statecraft.

The Emergent Tradition

What I am calling the "emergent tradition" of contemporary political theology,¹ identifiable with certain postliberal theologians such as Stanley Hauerwas, John Milbank, and Oliver O'Donovan, bears an unmistakable affinity for the alternative reading of the state and civil society which recognizes in the standard account an *apologia* for the eclipse of the proper public, political character of the church and, consequently, a distortion of its mission. Accordingly, the emergent tradition rejects politics as statecraft and envisions the church as a concrete public, political space in its own right. The contours of this postliberal political theology are best discerned by considering both what it deems problematic in

the dominant tradition as well as the ways it attempts to recover an Augustinian vision of the church as the site of a distinctly theological politics.

The political captivity of political theology

From the perspective of the emergent tradition, the embrace of the modern *mythos*, with its account of politics as statecraft, by the dominant tradition is symptomatic of the political captivity of that tradition. An explanation of this charge begins with the politically reductionist nature of the dominant tradition. To suggest that the dominant tradition is politically reductionist is *not* to claim, as is frequently done, that political theology reduces faith to temporal, political matters and dismisses the transcendent-spiritual dimension of Christianity. Rather, the charge of political reductionism (ironically) pertains precisely to the ways the dominant tradition attempts to distance itself from the charge of reducing faith to politics. Whether it is Neuhaus's eschatological prohibition of sanctifying any political order, Gutiérrez's condemnation of "politico-religious messianism," or Metz's and Moltmann's abhorrence of "political religion," the refusal to grant the Christian *mythos* a political presence more substantive than the "general" or "indirect" role accorded the church as a guardian of values *reduces* Christian political engagement to the options offered by the world, more specifically, by the regnant liberal order. This is to say, the dominant tradition conceives of Christian political engagement on the world's terms (Milbank 1990). Indeed, each strand is quite explicit in its embrace of modernity's cartography of social and political space. At the heart of the dominant forms of political theology is the insistence that Christians, under the influence of Christian values and vision, commit themselves to politics on modernity's terms, whether in its more conservative or progressive modes, and each strand is equally vehement in its denunciation as sectarian or narcissistically ecclesio-centric any effort to articulate Christian political engagement on terms other than those circumscribed by the modern *mythos* of statecraft.

What renders this symptomatic of political captivity is the way in which it reflects a certain forgetfulness on the part of the dominant political theologians. They have forgotten their own lesson, that all theology is always already political. The modern differentiation of life into autonomous spheres, the separation of theology and politics, is a ruse. Every theology embodies a *mythos*, a vision of human community. The political theologians rail against political religion, against the church's identifying with a concrete political program, even as they embrace the political vision of the modern West and insist that Christianity's political task is to nurture that vision. Although they claim that Christianity is not concretely or immediately political, they argue that Christianity is politically correlated with liberalism, statecraft, socialism, "the American experiment." In the end, political theology is but another, albeit modern, instance of the political religion its advocates profess to abhor.

That the dominant tradition is a modern instance of political religion, however, is not what renders that tradition liable to the charge of political captivity. According to the emergent tradition, political religion is not intrinsically problematic. What renders the dominant tradition problematic, and a form of political captivity, is that it sanctions the *wrong* politics. The dominant tradition is an instance of political captivity insofar as it identifies the Christian *mythos* with the wrong political correlates – the modern state and civil society.

The dominant tradition rightly fears the deadly results of bad Christian politics (although it erroneously attributes the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century conflicts to the Church *simpliciter*), but its solution fails. Instead of articulating a true Christian politics, it attempts in vain to distance the church from politics and as a result delivers Christians – body and creed – to the agony of modern politics as statecraft (statecraft has proven at least as bloody as Christendom). The emergent tradition seeks to escape this captivity by recovering a true politics.

Toward a true politics

The emergent tradition's rejection of the modern *mythos* of politics as statecraft is founded on theological judgments concerning the church, salvation, and eschatology that differ from those that underwrite the dominant tradition. Refusing the modern nation-state's claim to the right to organize human community in its own image, the emergent tradition sees in the practices of the church the true politics. This is to say, the emergent tradition finds the political correlate of the Christian *mythos*, not in the secular state and civil society, but in the church (Hauerwas 1991; Milbank 1990). Hence, Christian political engagement takes shape in a distinctly theological politics that is not reducible to a Weberian correlation of abstract values with secular political options. The church is no longer viewed as the apolitical (or only "generally" political) custodian of values or worldviews, and its mission ceases to be the advancement of Western liberalism. Rather, Christian politics takes form in the distinct witness of the church to Christ's redemption of politics as the renewal of the friendship/communion of humanity in God.

It is no mistake that the works of two of the leading voices of this effort to recover a theological politics have been compared to Augustine's *City of God*, for the theologians in the emergent tradition see themselves as working out Augustine's vision of theological politics. Recall that in his *City of God* Augustine leveled the startling charge against Rome that it was not, in the true sense, a republic. He unmasked the Roman order as politically reductive, as less than a genuine politics, because, founded as it was on self-interest and violent *dominion*, it could not enact redemption. The communion it offered was but a simulacrum or parody of genuine human community, the true polity or politics. By way of contrast, Augustine lifts up the Christian community. Its life is truly

public and authentically political. This is the case, observes Augustine, because the order of its life is liturgical, which is to say that because it eucharistically participates in Christ's reconciling sacrifice it is able to effect redemption – the renewal of human communion/community. And this is precisely what the true polity, the true politics, is about.

Reclaiming the church as the true politics, however, need not necessarily entail a wholesale rejection of other political formations like modern states and civil society. While these postliberal political theologians insist that a properly theological politics precludes a *theory* of such institutions and their relation to the church (on the grounds that such theories inevitably reify what is properly understood as temporal – meaning, as it originally did in Christian political discourse, “contingent,” “passing,” “temporary”), some of these theologians, such as O'Donovan and Yoder, have offered ad hoc judgments that amount to modest affirmations of some functions and forms of particular political (or, more accurately, in an Augustinian vein, “sub-political”) formations distinct from the church. O'Donovan, for example, has developed a careful and nuanced defense of some forms of early modern liberalism, on the grounds that in some instances early modern liberalism could be construed as a form of statecraft that *serves* the church by maintaining an order that enables the church to carry out its properly public and political mission, which is the proclamation and ingathering of the true human communion/community (O'Donovan 1996; see also Yoder 1997). One should note that this is an instance, not of erecting the church within the parameters of the modern *mythos* as the dominant tradition does, but of positioning the early modern state within the Christian *mythos*, with the result that social and political space is shared by the church and a state for the sake of the church's mission. In other words, O'Donovan's recognition of the early modern state as an (admittedly ambiguous) servant of the church eludes the political captivity of the dominant tradition both by refusing to reduce the church to an apolitical (or only “generally” political) entity and by reversing the direction of authority in the Weberian model, where the church effectively serves the state.

What O'Donovan and Yoder make particularly clear is that the heart of the emergent tradition is not simply the replacement of a sovereign state with a hegemonic church, but a political rendering of the claim that Christ is Lord. For the proponents of the emergent tradition, the claim that the church is the exemplary form of human community is first and foremost a claim that the meaning of all politics and every community flows from participation in Christ. The true form of politics is visible only as every political form is drawn into relation with Christ, the desire of the nations.

Theological synopsis

The emergent tradition's rejection of the modern *mythos* of politics as statecraft in favor of a distinctly theological politics is founded on the conviction that God

is active in history now bringing about a new age, the contours of which are discernible not in Western liberalism, democratic socialism, or the *Pax Americana* but in Christ, in the work of Christ's Spirit as it gathers Christ's body, the church. There, in that space where humanity is eucharistically joined once again in communion with one another and with God, we see the true community, the true polity, the true politics – a politics that modern statecraft, embedded as it is in the (dis)order of *dominion* and the endless conflict of self-interested individuals, cannot even dream of, but only mock.

Conclusion

Assessments of the state and civil society in contemporary political theology diverge over the issue of freedom and discipline. Are the state and civil society agents of freedom that Christianity should serve with its values and critical vision? Or are the state and civil society disciplinary formations that have eclipsed the true public and political mission of the church? In the final analysis, the issue is one of theological judgments concerning ecclesiology, eschatology, and soteriology that can be summed up in the question, “What is the proper political correlate of the Christian *mythos*?” Leviathan or the Body of Christ?

Note

- 1 The designation “emergent” implies no prophecy about the tradition's future status as dominant, incorporated, etc.

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CHAPTER 30

Democracy

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No system of government is perfect, nor can any claim to be Christian. Yet democracy is widely regarded today as the best available political polity, and many church traditions, even those previously wary of democracy, now regard it as a form of governance that resonates well with Christian values. However, despite such consensus not all theologians or social theorists agree on what is meant by democracy. One reason for this is the complex history of the concept; another is the way in which it has been variously formed and understood within different national contexts. Even more problematic is the gap between the rhetoric of democracy and the social realities evident in many countries committed to democratic rule. Democracy can, in fact, be used as a slogan in the interests of political expediency. Yet, despite these problems and shortcomings, the vision of a democratic world order is a compelling one. In what follows I will begin by considering the nature of democracy, commenting on both its origins and the forms or systems of governance in which it has become embodied.

The Nature of Democracy

All democrats agree that democracy implies a form of government elected by and responsible to the people in free and fair elections. They would also agree that democracy requires the rule of law, the protection of civil liberties, the separation of legislative and judicial powers, the freedom of the media, and the upholding of human rights. A major point of disagreement, however, concerns the extent to which personal liberties should be constrained by social responsibilities. This has led to the distinction between liberal and social democracy, and more radical anarchist versions of both. Anarchism is a rejection of any tendency toward statism or totalitarianism. As such it provides an enduring critique