

Trump and Political Theology:
Unmaking Truth and Democracy

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A Selection of Publications

By Jack David Eller

From Culture to Ethnicity to Conflict: An Anthropological Perspective on International Ethnic Conflict (University of Michigan Press, 1999)

Violence and Culture: A Cross-Cultural and Interdisciplinary Approach (Wadsworth, 2005)

Introducing Anthropology of Religion: Culture to the Ultimate (Routledge, 2007, 2014)

Cultural Anthropology: Global Forces, Local Lives (Routledge, 2009, 2013, 2016, 2020)

Cruel Creeds, Virtuous Violence: Religious Violence Across Culture and History (Prometheus Books, 2010)

Cultural Anthropology 101 (Routledge, 2015)

Culture and Diversity in the United States: So Many Ways to be American (Routledge, 2015)

Social Science and Historical Perspectives: Society, Science, and Ways of Knowing (Routledge, 2017)

Inventing American Traditions: From the Mayflower to Cinco de Mayo (Reaktion Books, 2018)

Psychological Anthropology for the 21st Century (Routledge, 2019)

Advanced Endorsements

OMG. Wow. Here is an analysis of the Donald Trump phenomenon that goes deeper and wider than anything I've read. A must read no matter who the next president is because David Eller's discussion of "political theology" reveals so much about the craziness and ironic coherence of American politics.

—Mark Galli,
Former Editor-in-Chief of *Christianity Today*

In the void left by the death of God, Eller explores how the violence of language and the power of mediatic charisma can create a new politics of myth, ritual, and emotion: from this abyss Trump emerges as a figure of exception that reveals the contradictions of liberal democracies. This is a fundamental book to understand our age.

—Dr. Antonio Cerella, Kingston University, London,
Author of *Genealogies of Political Modernity*

Eller highlights the inescapable significance of political theology to late modern discourse. His work combines a rich historical survey with a penetrating analysis of religious thought in twenty-first-century America.

—Dr. Benjamin T. Lynerd, Christopher Newport University,
Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science

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Foreword

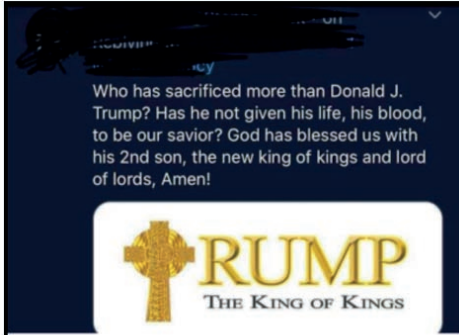
By Darren M. Slade

I had the morbid pleasure of being on the campus of Liberty University during the 2016 presidential election between candidates Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. Significantly, throughout its existence, both the institution and its faculty prided itself on being the gatekeepers of social and personal morality. Though I was originally unfamiliar with the university's founder, Jerry Falwell Sr., and his demonizing rhetoric against those he judged to be depraved contaminants of America's "Christian" conscience, over time it was soon apparent that he, like many evangelicals I encountered, had no real interest in promoting Christlike godliness. Rather, they employed the language of religion and morality because it was expedient to do so. They had become political sycophants of the Republican Party, and they were willing to say and do anything to maintain a political, legislative, racial, and economic control over society's marginalized voices. This willingness to overlook some of the most unconscionable behavior by Republican leaders and fellow religionists was never more apparent than when I witnessed the cult-like endorsement of candidate Donald Trump from some of Liberty's faculty and theology students. The mental and moral gymnastics needed to rationalize their endorsement was beyond disturbing; it was dangerous. Indeed, these theologians exhibited the type of dangerous brainwashing that usually occurs within cults of personality.

Somehow, these self-proclaimed "salt of the earth" gatekeepers were more concerned with Hillary Clinton using a personal email server than they were with the fact that an obvious con-man had never once exhibited the type of love, empathy, grace, forgiveness, or compassion that Christ himself demanded of his followers. I listened to certain professors become visibly giddy when they first heard the chant, "Lock her up," at a Trump rally, yet they never spoke a word of condemnation when they heard Mr. Trump brag about sexually assaulting unsuspecting women. Despite Trump's obvious biblical illiteracy and lack of church attendance, these professional apologists were more than willing to view him as the embodiment of Christian values. Despite his track record for reveling in sin and debauchery, these Christian leaders still saw him as an answer to prayer. Despite his obvious bigotry, lack of integrity, emotional immaturity, and

mental instability, these followers responded to Donald Trump as though he were the second coming of Christ, displaying an excitement and unconditional allegiance typically reserved for a demigod. And despite the nonstop flow of scandals and criminal behavior during his four-year administration, many of his supporters remained unmoved in their loyalty.

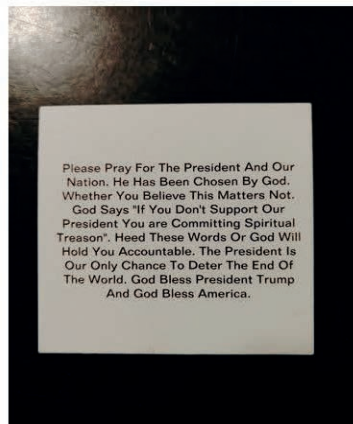
For most of us, it was obvious what had occurred right before our very eyes. Specialists the world over watched the formation of a genuine cult of personality develop in real time. Of course, this Trumpcult would have



Screenshot of a public Facebook post from a Trump supporter on October 23, 2020.
Screenshot by Darren Slade.

made for a very benign academic study had it not also involved surrounding the madman with unquestioning loyalists while giving him access to and authority over the most powerful military force and nuclear arsenal in the world. In a word, Trump had become their Messiah. Not surprisingly, I received a letter in the mail expressing this very sentiment from a group claiming to speak on behalf of God. The letter declared that Mr. Trump was

“God’s Chosen One” and that he “Is Our Only Chance To Deter The End Of The World.” As is standard in religious cults, the letter even attempted to engage in spiritual manipulation by writing, “God Says ‘If You Don’t Support Our President You are Committing Spiritual Treason.’”



Anonymous letter received in the mail during the 2020 presidential election. Photographs by Darren Slade.

Those four years of Trump's administration left the unswindled asking what it was that made people willingly overlook such blatant corruption for so long. What was it about the "other side" that made otherwise decent people become religious zealots for a fanatical political figurehead who befriended dictators and praised tyrants? The answer, like too many things since 2016, came in the form of a Tweet. Actor Jon Voight once shared a video in July of 2020 where he pleaded the urgency for voting against Democrats:

And to have left wing behavior, left wing danger, destroying this nation, He will not allow, because my fellow Americans, God the Almighty gave all this to us, so we as a civilization with all our greatness must give back and we shall protect the USA with God, and He who understands this Liberty must protect as well.¹

Almost four months later, Jon Voight tweeted another video where he compared the victory of President-elect Joe Biden to the work of the devil. "This is now our greatest fight since the Civil War, the battle of righteousness versus Satan. Yes 'Satan' because these leftists are evil, corrupt." Voight then went on to make the battle lines even clearer, "Let us give our trust to God and fight now for Trump's victory because we all know this ballot count is corruption like they are. So let us not back down. But fight this fight as if it is our last fight on Earth."²

Sadly, the Republican Party has done a good job of convincing religionists that liberals and progressivist policies are quite literally evil incarnate. A vote for Republicans is a vote for God himself whereas a vote for Democrats is a vote for Satan. Although Donald Trump was a registered Democrat from 2001–2009, he soon realized that he could dupe America's most religious by capitalizing on an inherently xenophobic, exclusionist, and dichotomistic mindset. What this rhetoric and hypocrisy demonstrated for me back at Liberty University was that most evangelicals were willing to embrace (and even imitate) a malignant narcissist's behavior all for the sake of fighting Satan's encroachment into American society. It revealed to me, as it had to many other disillusioned Christians, that these followers would, in fact, support the antichrist himself as long as he ran under the banner of the supposedly "God-loving" Republican Party. To this day, as I work with religious specialists and faith leaders all around the world, I continually hear just how ashamed and embarrassed they are to be associated with the name "Christian" *because* of President Trump and his Christian followers. But

¹ Jon Voight, "Faith and Trust," Twitter, July 22, 2020, <https://twitter.com/jonvoight/status/1286055348973867008?s=20>.

² Jon Voight, "We all know the truth," Twitter, November 10, 2020, <https://twitter.com/jonvoight/status/1326323889417322497?s=20>.

how in the world was any of this even possible in the first place? What did we all just experience with the Trump presidency?

Dr. Jack David Eller's book, *Trump and Political Theology*, provides the most definitive explanation for how it is that the Trumpcult was able to develop and spread with such fervency among the American populace. Using insights of political theory and the place of religion in permitting a sovereign to rule, Dr. Eller offers a social-scientific description for what it meant for President Donald Trump to lie so profusely and for his followers to be deceived so easily. *Trump and Political Theology* exposes just how Americans are especially susceptible to authoritarian leaders who would destroy truth and democracy in order to save face and why so many Americans would rationalize this behavior as a moral necessity. This book is primed to become one of the most significant academic examinations of Donald Trump's abysmal four-year presidency and the enablers who allowed the United States to degrade into such a lurid, loathsome laughing stock around the civilized world.

Dr. Eller's academic prowess as a world-renown scholar makes his incredible insights into the Trump era all the more important to help us understand and learn from the 2016 presidential debacle. The book invites Americans to consider the cracks in their political system, as well as the collective insecurity that would put democracy itself on the verge of collapse. As an anthropologist, Dr. Eller is suited to inform us about the human tendency toward tribalism and extremist thinking. As a religious outsider, he is suited to confront the political and religious hypocrisy expressed by those who are too blind to notice (or even care). *Trump and Political Theology* is a must-read for anyone seeking an explanation for what in the hell the world just went through with Donald Trump and why this was not (and likely will not be) an isolated event.

Preface

This book was composed in the spring and summer of 2020, during the heat of the presidential campaign and the height of the coronavirus pandemic. This preface is composed in November, the day after Joe Biden accepted the declaration of his victorious bid for the presidency, marking (presumably, ideally, ordinarily) the end of the Trump era.

If Donald Trump really does leave office on January 20, which he must do short of a stunning recount reversal or a judicial (or other) coup, does this book remain relevant? The name “Trump” as the title lead suggests that the study contained herein is primarily about Trump, but it is not. This is a study of power, its sources, and, even more urgently, its relation to “normal” practices and institutions like law, constitutions, political traditions, and democracy itself. I stress “normal” for two reasons, which are the interrelated inspiration for this book in the first place. Carl Schmitt, in his reorientation of political theology, emphasized that power or sovereignty lies precisely not in the normal but in the *exceptional*, where and when norms, traditions, laws, and even constitutions are violated. More profoundly, he argued that the exceptional is not only the death but the *birth* of the normal, that it is only in *the decision* that norms and laws and constitutions are created at all.

The second reason for stressing normal is that, however one may feel about him, both sides agree that Trump is/was not a normal politician or a normal president. Some celebrated his exceptionality as just the tonic for the country’s ailment, someone to shake if not break the government. Others cringed at his antics and his authoritarian tendencies and despaired for our democracy, if not for our world. And Trump is indeed a force, for good or ill. But more importantly, more enduringly, Trump is a lens—a shocking lens, admittedly—through which to observe the inner workings of power. His conduct and his dazzling success at ignoring and trampling precedent, tradition, and law illustrate Schmitt’s point exquisitely, namely the contingency and fragility of democracy, of truth, and of reality itself. As I contend in a later chapter, what Schmitt was describing was *the will*, the sovereign will, the will to power but also the will to reality.

Democracy or any other “normal” political system is not fully prepared to confront the sovereign will. It assumes a normal leader, and in

normal times leaders restrain themselves by internalizing and respecting norms and rules. In exceptional times, the leader suffers no such restraint; that is what *makes* them exceptional times. And Trump has guessed the Schmittian secret: there is no one and nothing to stop him. Some of his powers are constitutionally granted, like the power of pardon, but still open to abuse. Other powers are discovered or invented, like the power of executive order or “signing statement,” while there is underestimated power in the brazen lie. But when he bends or shatters the “guardrails” of democracy—ignoring Congress, packing courts, disparaging his own executive agencies, and lastly delegitimizing the electoral process itself—he exposes precisely how vulnerable and impotent those institutions are to respond. As I will say below, the only thing that can constrain such a will is an equal and opposite will, and that we do not see.

Trump did not emerge from a vacuum; there has been a long road toward an imperial presidency and Republican anti-democratic impulses (driven not least by the demographic fact that most Americans do not vote for Republicans). And Trump too shall pass. But authoritarianism and illiberal democracy—or the end of democracy—will continue to loom, even more so since he has revealed the insubstantiality and defenselessness of “normal” politics. Others no doubt will learn and exploit this lesson, the Schmittian lesson, the political theology lesson, that laws and institutions are never completely settled and secure, that the exception and the decision are perpetual and irrepressible threats, and that normal politics is relatively unarmed against the will of the populist, the authoritarian, the trickster-troll who would gleefully burn it all down.

Introduction

The underlying rationale of politics is the quest for finality and decisiveness in the affairs of groups, ends that are permanently frustrated by the slippery and inconclusive circumstances in which that quest occurs....The fundamental thought-practice of finality is the decision.¹

Something is wrong. Everything seems to be in decline, even upside down. Old truths dissolve into uncertainty (like Marx's solids that melted into air more than a century and a half ago), and no one understands it or knows what to do about it. Then there is Donald Trump. He violates every norm of presidential comportment, attacks every institution, violates every ethics rule, insults every rival, and disregards every standard of truth in the service of making America great again. Is he a cause or an effect of the condition—or is he the cure, as he himself and his followers believe? Is his presidency corrosive, or is it revelatory?

In the present moment, as numerous scholars have noted, there is renewed attention to the notion of “political theology” as both a diagnosis and a remedy for the malaise of modern America and of the West in general (how quaint it is to recall Jimmy Carter's appeal to malaise more than forty years ago, when the first rumbles of political/economic tectonic shifts were perceptible). For some contemporary sufferers, the therapy is a simple and literal return to/of God (whom Nietzsche may have prematurely declared dead, or who may once again have risen from the dead), of old-time religion and biblical values. Such would be merely the latest occasion of Christian revival, a venerable tradition in the United States, which has seen continuous waves of revivalism and “great awakenings” throughout its history. For very specific constituencies, like the Reconstructionists or Dominionists of the Chalcedon Foundation, this means virtual theocracy or at least biblocracy, government and society structured along (especially Old Testament) biblical lines. For others, and presumably for the majority of scholars who investigate and/or advocate it, political theology means (re)establishing a supernatural or divine ground for government and more generally for

¹ Michael Freeden, *The Political Theory of Political Thinking: The Anatomy of a Practice* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 22.

2 *Trump and Political Theology*

society—a sort of Thomistic cosmological first cause or unmoved mover—to secure them against the peril of dissolution.

The Trump phenomenon is an apposite, even obligatory, opportunity to reconsider political theology and the relation between religion and society/state, and not only because of Trump’s incomprehensible support among American evangelicals despite being perhaps the most ungodly political figure in recent memory. At the extreme, some followers (and sometimes he himself) have likened Trump to the messiah, the savior, the king of Israel, the very voice or hammer of God. I am not implying in the slightest way that Trump possesses an articulate political theology, or any other political theory, or that his campaign or his presidency represents a conscious political theology. What I am contending is that the very abnormality of Trump’s politics lifts a veil on the operation of power—of the nature of law and of sovereignty—in much the same way that abnormal psychology lifts a veil on mental function. Thus, viewing the Trump phenomenon through the lens of political theology sheds light on both, as he exposes the profound contingency and vulnerability of the political while also forcing us to consider religious or symbolic forces and resources beyond the familiar Christian or theistic ones.

What is Political Theology?

At the most obvious level, the term “political theology” designates some relation between politics and religion, as well as or in addition to an application of theology to political questions. However, like all technical and cultural terminology, things are never so obvious and never so settled. Jan Assman famously characterizes political theology as the “ever-changing relationships between political community and religious order, between power [or authority: *Herrschaft*] and salvation [*Heil*].”² Saul Newman’s recent brief introduction to political theology expands on the definition to include “the way in which political concepts, discourses and institutions—particularly sovereignty—are influenced, shaped and underpinned by religious categories of thought.”³

In *The Future of Illusion*, Victoria Kahn defines political theology quite tersely but instructively as “the theological legitimation or religious

² Quoted in Hent de Vries, “Introduction: Before, Around, and Beyond the Theologico-Political,” in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, ed. Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 25. Original quotation in Jan Assmann, *Herrschaft und Heil: Politische Theologie in Ägypten, Israel und Europa* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 2000), 15.

³ Saul Newman, *Political Theology: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 4–5.

dimension of political authority,” raising the critical issue of legitimation.⁴ This issue is not at all lost on other commentators, including Newman—in fact, it will soon become central to the entire enterprise—as he grants that “the problem of political theology is a way of thinking about the foundations and legitimacy of power in modern societies,”⁵ perhaps especially but by no means exclusively in modern societies. Meanwhile, Andrew March, of all places in an essay about Islamic politics, argues that political theology is “the assertion that certain concepts, gaps, and aspirations immanent in Western political theory are transferred from theology either in the form of presence or of absence”—primarily the presence/absence of a god.⁶

Political theology may be predominantly Western, but it is not exclusively modern. A pre-Christian thinker, Marcus Terentius Varro (116–27 BCE), is often credited with the first use of the term, naming *theologia politikē* or *theologia civilis* as one of the three branches of theology (and the prerogative of priests), along with “mythical” and “cosmological” or natural theologies, the realms of poets and philosophers, respectively.⁷ Particularly in premodern societies, including ancient Israel, politics and theology were intimately, although not always comfortably, entangled, and as Christianity penetrated and crystallized in the Roman Empire, the tension between politics and religion became acute. The admonitions of Jesus that God’s kingdom was not of this world and that believers should render to Caesar what was Caesar’s and to God what was God’s were simultaneously helpful and unhelpful, stipulating but obscuring the chasm between earthly and heavenly authority. As is well known, Christians were often castigated in Rome, not so much for their unconventional beliefs as their disloyal behavior. Their crime was more political (failing to revere and obey the emperor) than religious (believing in the wrong/false god), although failing to worship the old gods was potentially catastrophic too.

As Christopher Rowland warns, Christianity’s “eschatological hope of God’s kingdom on earth which is such a dominant thread in New Testament theology cannot allow any easy accommodation between the church, the community of those called to bear witness to the reign of God, and political powers.”⁸ Not that this stopped anyone, like Constantine and

⁴ Victoria Ann Kahn, *The Future of Illusion: Political Theology and Early Modern Texts* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 1.

⁵ Newman, *Political Theology*, xx.

⁶ Andrew F. March, “Genealogies of Sovereignty in Islamic Political Theology,” *Social Research* 80, no. 1 (2013), 293.

⁷ de Vries, “Introduction,” 25.

⁸ Christopher Rowland, “Scripture: New Testament,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, ed. Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 33.

4 *Trump and Political Theology*

subsequent monarchs, from trying. Augustine faced the challenge with kindness in his *City of God*, recognizing, contrary to many fundamentalist Christian sects today, that even if there are two cities or kingdoms—a fallen worldly one and a perfect heavenly one—nevertheless humans are citizens of both. Appreciating that humans are thoroughly social beings long before the advent of modern social science, Jean Bethke Elshtain judges that Augustine taught, “Christians are not to hunker down in the church, but to approach the world with a loving worldliness, born out of a recognition of the world’s many goodnesses and blessings.”⁹ Truly, “earthly institutions have a real claim on us,”¹⁰ and we would best think of ourselves as dual citizens, although the same complications with dual national citizenship today apply to dual spiritual citizenship.

We cannot possibly rehearse the entire history of political-theological thinking here, so let it suffice to say, along with Elizabeth Phillips, that there have historically been at least four eras of or approaches to political theology in Christendom:

The first is related to theological understandings of creation, fall and human nature. Some suggest that there are basically two types of political theology: one type begins from positive possibilities inherent in God’s creation and the other type begins from human limitations due to sin. A second way would be to describe distinctive approaches to political theology according to theological traditions, noting the differences between Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, Anabaptist and Eastern Orthodox political theologies. Third, we can note differences between political theologies by contrasting three distinct approaches within twentieth-century scholarship: Political Theology, Public Theology and Liberation Theology. Finally, it is also important to note more recently emerging schools of thought—what might be considered the second generation of political theologies.¹¹

Hence, Assman’s ever-changing relationships.

⁹ Jean Bethke Elshtain, “Augustine,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, ed. Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 40–41.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹¹ Elizabeth Phillips, *Political Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), 31–32.

Modern Political Theory: Carl Schmitt

Most scholars would concur that the contemporary phase of political theology is greatly beholden to Carl Schmitt whose classic 1922 *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* relaunched the concept and sent it in a new direction. To fully grasp Schmitt's argument, let us look back to Thomas Hobbes, whose *Leviathan* is a work of political theology in its own right. Conceived during the convulsions of the English Revolution of the 1640s–1650s that culminated with the execution of a king and the establishment of a Protestant fundamentalist regime, *Leviathan* ponders the *reason for* and the *proper form of* organized political institutions, namely, the state. Hobbes' premise that humans are essentially selfish and violent and that without restraint their lives would be nasty, cruel, brutish, and short is only too well known. Human nature may create the *need for*, but it does not provide the form of or, more crucially, the *justification for*, the state. Hobbes expressly disallows religion as the foundation of the state, due to the very sectarian strife that tore his country

apart and killed its ruler. At the same time, Hobbes finds no “Universal Reason,” no absolute or natural law, that would dictate the correct form of government; for the task of politics, rationality is “impotent” and of no assistance. Yet, in the words of Otfried Höffe, “The political community (or ‘commonwealth,’ as Hobbes would say) must justify itself in the eyes of every individual involved. For if political authority cannot justify itself in this way, it remains nothing but a case of mere force in relation to each individual.”¹²

To put it bluntly, and in terms immediately relevant to Schmitt (and hopefully increasingly clearly to Trump), Hobbes asserts that “there is not amongst Men an Universal Reason agreed upon in any Nation, besides the

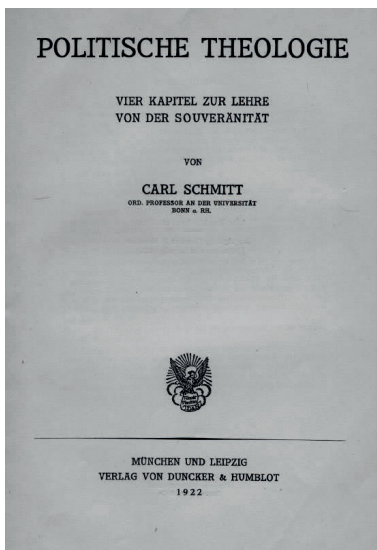


Fig. 1 The title page of Carl Schmitt's 1922 *Political Theology*

¹² Otfried Höffe, *Thomas Hobbes*, trans. Nicholas Walker (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2015), 11–12.

Reason of him that hath the Sovereign Power.”¹³ On the principle of *sed auctoritas, non veritas, facit legem* (“it is authority, not truth, which makes the law”) overtly stated in *Leviathan*, Hobbes concludes that “the law is, in fact, the order of the legislator and the order is a declaration of will,” and “the civil law is a speech, defined by the will of the State, which commands the individual things that must be done.”¹⁴ Ideally, the sovereign ruler is guided by facts and logic, but he is not bound by them, and, in the end, such law or legal institution as actually exists “is an emanation of the will of the sovereign,” a “command (*imperatum*).”¹⁵ On a good day, this “artificial reason of the State presents itself as ‘universal,’ that is valid for all citizens”—if not for the whole world—“and as ‘shared’ or—more literally—‘which everyone has agreed upon.’”¹⁶ But this agreement or consensus, which will become a “contract” for subsequent theorists like Rousseau and Locke, is a legal and cultural fiction; the sovereign is sovereign because and insofar as s/he gives or promulgates the law. Therefore, there is no law before and independent of the sovereign: “The sovereign is the only legislator and, as such, *he is not himself subjected to the law*.”¹⁷ In short, Hobbes maintains that “the sovereign (whether the king or the assembly) stands above the civil law, of which he constitutes the source (partly because, as legislator, *if he wants he can amend it*).”¹⁸

In this light, the political theology of Schmitt is not unprecedented. Let us first agree with Victoria Kahn that Schmitt was not defending the traditional Christian position that divinity somehow undergirds and justifies the political order; rather, in his analysis, the “absolutist state was *modeled on* but not *legitimized by* reference to the omnipotent God.”¹⁹ The question for Schmitt—and it is a more pertinent question today than strictly religious political justification—is the relation between the leader and the law. His *Political Theology* opens with the stunning but oft-quoted line, “Sovereign is he who decides on the exception.”²⁰ This concept of the exception is absolutely central to his political theory. It does not mean emergency declarations or reactions to disaster or war; instead, it refers to the very capacity to give the law *and to take it away again*, that is, to determine when the law applies and when it does not. Law, rather than being the basis for

¹³ Quoted in Raffaella Santi, “Legal Thought in Early Modern England: The Theory of Thomas Hobbes,” *Economics World* 6, no. 5 (2018), 385.

¹⁴ Quoted in Santi, “Legal Thought,” 386.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 385.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 387, emphasis added.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 388, emphasis added.

¹⁹ Kahn, *The Future of Illusion*, 14, emphasis added.

²⁰ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005 [1985/1934]), 5.

political decisions, *is the result of political decisions*, specifically the decisions of the sovereign: “The legal order rests on a decision and not on a norm.”²¹ And the exception exposes the contingency of law because law cannot completely prepare for it or “subsume” it. In the moment of exception, it becomes clear that “all law is ‘situational law’”:

The sovereign produces and guarantees the situation in its totality. He has the monopoly over this last decision. Therein resides the essence of the state’s sovereignty, which must be juristically defined correctly, not as the monopoly to coerce or to rule, but as the monopoly to decide. The exception reveals most clearly the essence of the state’s authority. The decision parts here from the legal norm, and (to formulate it paradoxically) authority proves that to produce law it need not be based on law.²²



Fig. 2 The title page of Thomas Hobbes’ 1651 *Leviathan*

Nor is law or the authority by which it is made a product of reason or empiricism. Law, as Schmitt writes elsewhere, “is abstract thought, which cannot be derived from facts.”²³

Indeed, the political decision arising only from the mind and will of the sovereign, especially the decision to set aside the law in the first place, “is analogous to the miracle in theology,” and now we begin to approach the theological element in Schmitt’s political theology.²⁴ This law-giving capacity, this potency to say the word and make it so, resembles the creative power of the Judeo-Christian god. This leads Schmitt to assert that “all

²¹ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 10.

²² *Ibid.*, 13.

²³ Quoted in Arthur Bradley and Antonio Cerella, “The Future of Political Theology and the Legacy of Carl Schmitt,” *Journal for Cultural Research* 20, no. 3 (2016), 211. Original in Carl Schmitt, *Der Wert des Staates und die Bedeutung des Einzelnen* [*The Value of the State and the Importance of the Individual*] (Tübingen: Mohr, 1914), 37–38.

²⁴ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36.

significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.”²⁵ In the end, though, he laments that, in the present day under the regime of constitutional law and parliamentary/congressional legislation and case law jurisprudence—aimed at following procedure, preserving the normal, and avoiding or constraining the exception—“all tendencies ... point toward eliminating the sovereign in this sense.”²⁶ In a real way, sovereignty as Schmitt envisions it hardly exists, or at least is denied to exist.

The Problem of Legitimation

Carl Schmitt interestingly arrives where Hobbes arrived and quotes him thusly: *Autoritas, non veritas facit legem*—again, “authority, not truth, makes the law.”²⁷ The one with jurisdiction, the position to “speak the law,” whether a god or king/emperor/dictator (dictator, literally, is the one who speaks), has authority because s/he is the veritable *author* of legal and institutional reality. Either way—and this is the key—the law, and more broadly the social system, comes from and depends upon something other than and outside of itself. This is what Arthur Bradley and Antonio Cerella call the enduring “mystery of the political.”²⁸ It is not surprising in the slightest that the political mystery would get mixed with the religious mystery.

For much of Western Christian history, and for many Christian scholars and apologists today, this mixture was explicit and literal: the Christian god was the maker and guarantor of the ultimate and eternal law, whether or not particular human political systems conformed to that law. The divine law was the standard by which all temporal law was judged, and divinity was the extra-political source and ground of political society, with its power to violate natural and moral law at will (i.e., the miracle), such natural and moral law being an act of will in the first place.

The issue, in a word, is *legitimation*: *why* should we have this law, *why* should we kneel to this king, *why* does the office of king (or president or prime minister or party chairman, *ad infinitum*) exist at all? I have argued elsewhere that one of the most important functions of religion is just such legitimation, by a variety of strategies.²⁹ These include *the metaphysics*, *the model*, and *the mandate*. An example of metaphysical legitimation would be the Hindu-Buddhist concept of karma: if it is simply a feature of reality that

²⁵ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁸ Bradley and Cerella, “The Future of Political Theology,” 211.

²⁹ Jack David Eller, *Introducing Anthropology of Religion*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2015).

actions generate spiritual consequences, then the station of any individual (determined by that person's past actions) in a caste hierarchy or a reincarnation system is justified, as is the social order premised upon it (the caste system). The model refers to the precedent set by the actions of a founding and therefore authoritative figure, like Jesus or Muhammad or Gautama (see the discussion of myth and the paradigmatic acts of spirits and ancestors in Chapter 7). Christians commonly orient their behavior to the model provided by Jesus, sometimes directly pondering, "What would Jesus do?" The words and deeds of Muhammad (the instructions that he received from Allah and the collection of his sayings and rulings, the *hadith* of Islam) provide a still more fully-realized road map for society. Gautama, the original Buddha, set the prototype and laid down many of the rules for the subsequent Buddhist community. The mandate, quite obviously, is the express commands of founding and/or supernatural figures: if a deity said let there be light, or let there be ten commandments, or let there be (heterosexual) marriage, or let there be kings, then so be it.

The problem of the legitimation of authority occupied Max Weber as much as or more than it did Schmitt. Sociologists and political scientists well recall Weber's three forms or sources of authority—traditional, rational-legal, and charismatic. Traditional authority, generally derived from custom or habit and performed in rituals and symbols (again, see Chapter 7), and charismatic authority, experienced as an ineffable personal "gift of grace" and flowing from "revelation, heroism, or other leadership qualities of an individual," are an obvious bailiwick of religion.³⁰ However, rational-legal authority, encoded in formal offices and written documentation, is no stranger to religion either; the Catholic Church was and is distinguished by extensive office-holding and record-keeping. To be sure, the three versions of legitimate authority are not mutually exclusive and can and often do occur together (along with Weber's other forms of power—persuasion and coercion).

Without perhaps full awareness of the problem and the terms of legitimation, most pre-modern societies naturally turned to religion for its solution. In imperial China, the mandate of heaven secured the emperor's right to rule. In Europe, the divine right of kings achieved the same effect: if a particular person or family was the god's choice for ruler, then that person's/lineage's rule was ordained, and disobedience was tantamount to rebellion against the god. As Western history has abundantly shown, this does not assure smooth cooperation between religion and state: popes, for instance, have claimed the authority to install kings, while kings have asserted their authority to install popes. Martin Luther struggled with and

³⁰ Max Weber, "*Politik als Beruf*" (Politics as a Vocation), *Gesammelte Politische Schriften* (Muenchen, 1921). Originally a speech at Munich University, 1918, published in 1919 by Duncker & Humblodt, Munich.

vacillated on the tension of religion and state, emphasizing at one point “the priesthood of all believers and its equalization of all under the temporal authorities ordained by God” and then advocating in his 1523 *On Secular Authority* a “two kingdoms” perspective, in which Christ’s otherworldly kingdom of love and justice contrasts with earthly kingdoms ruined by sin “where secular rulers have authority and must wield the sword to maintain the peace,” with control over bodily but not spiritual matters.³¹

In other places and times, politico-religious authority and its legitimation were manifested in different ways. On Pacific and Melanesian islands like Tikopia, *mana* was the currency of efficacy in many undertakings. Chiefs had *mana*, as did great hunters and warriors, indeed anyone who could get things done and to whom others should defer. Arguably a noun, an adjective, and/or an adverb according to Raymond Firth, *mana* was not a property of its wielder; the “only real source of *mana* is in the spirit world. *Mana* does not mean the exercise of human powers but the use of something derived from gods or ancestors.”³²

Another common phenomenon was sacred kingship, in which the person, sometimes the very body, of the king instantiated society and rained potency upon it as he reigned over it. The Merina and Betsileo kingdoms of Madagascar are two of a great many examples where a force not unlike *mana* empowered the king. *Hasina* was a supernatural energy associated with life and reproduction, both human and natural, such as agriculture. Possessing or controlling *hasina* entitled a person to honor and authority, as the application of this mystical power facilitated the functioning of society and nature alike.³³ Among the Shilluk of southern Sudan, royal prerogatives were sanctioned by an ideology that each king was the reincarnation of the original king, participating in his primal authority. Finally, religion anchored the Japanese emperor’s right to rule; the island’s gods or *kami* spawned a corpus of sacred ceremonies, but this Way of the Gods also provided “the principles of imperial rule; it is a system of correct social and political etiquette; it is the ideal national morality; it is a system of patriotism and loyalty centering on emperor worship (‘Mikadoism’); it is, in its pure and original form, a nature worship.”³⁴ In the attendant mythology, the sun goddess Amaterasu-Omikami was the fount of royalty and the veritable ancestor of the human emperor; in the nineteenth century these beliefs and practices were organized into a nationalistic “state Shinto.”

³¹ Phillips, *Political Theology*, 61–62.

³² Raymond Firth, “The Analysis of Mana,” *The Journal of the Polynesian Society* 49, no. 196 (1940), 501.

³³ Maurice Bloch, *Ritual, History, and Power: Selected Papers in Anthropology* (London: The Athlone Press, 1979).

³⁴ Daniel Clarence Holtom, *The National Faith of Japan: A Study of Modern Shinto* (New York: Paragon Book Reprint Corp., 1965 [1938]), 5–6.

With all this religious legitimation of political authority, it is little wonder that the rise of secular regimes and democracies caused new difficulties in legitimation. When the head of Charles I rolled in 1649, negating and usurping his divine right as king—a Schmittian exception if there ever was one—the question had to be asked: on whose authority was the authority overthrown? When the United States (with its separation of church and state) and then the French revolutionary republic (with its much more virulent anti-clericalism) did away with kings altogether, not only some other form of government but some other legitimation for the government besides tradition and theology was demanded. As Schmitt bemoans, sovereignty would never be the same.

Claude Lefort analyzes this challenge in an influential essay on the alleged permanence of the theologico-political question. Especially following the American and French Revolutions, there was an inevitable and necessary project “to conceive of the state as an independent entity, to make politics a reality *sui generis*, and to relegate religion to the domain of private belief.”³⁵ As Lefort formulates it, in the secular republic “power no longer makes any gesture toward an outside ... it is no longer articulated with any other force that can be represented, and ... in that sense, it is disentangled from the religious.”³⁶ But now we look into the Schmittian/Hobbesian abyss: what is the authority, what is the legitimation, of any law that the secular republic passes—or of the government of the secular republic itself? Granted, there are other potential grounds for political identity and institutions than gods or supernatural forces—like “the nation” or “the people” or reason or nature or other more pestilent ones like class or race, all of which we will meet again soon—but *none of them transcends the society and its mundane politics*. There is no, at least no consistent, necessary, and absolute, Other beyond the society and the government that can serve as bedrock.

The nation/people/class/race and its founding documents like the U.S. Constitution suffice until, like a cartoon character running off a cliff, we look down and discover there is nothing solid under us. In other words, sooner or later we are due for a legitimation crisis, as Jürgen Habermas called it in the 1970s.³⁷ Consequentially, at almost the same moment, Jean-François Lyotard was probing the “postmodern condition” with its characteristic “incredulity toward metanarratives” or grand stories like

³⁵ Claude Lefort, “The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?” in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, ed. Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 149.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 161.

³⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1975 [1973]).

progress, capitalism, communism, liberalism, and of course theism.³⁸ Without these rocks to cling to, politics, society, even identity (since Habermas opined that a legitimation crisis “is directly an identity crisis”³⁹) is stripped bare for all to see—and to doubt.

Re- (or Un-)Thinking Political Theology in the Twenty-First Century

It is easy to understand, and difficult to dispute, that in the contemporary Western world “the turn to political theology is a way of talking about the crisis of liberal democracy—a crisis of values that derives from liberalism’s inability to offer a substantive defense of its own principles, including formal equality, religious neutrality, and religious tolerance.”⁴⁰ Pointing the way back to political theology, Bradley and Cerella contend that the liberal tradition is subsequently “deemed (both by defenders and critics alike) to be incapable of substantiating its own ontological claims because it surreptitiously appeals to a religious excess that it cannot expunge or metabolize.”⁴¹ An added danger, which is far more than theoretical in contemporary global politics, is that, during the “assault on liberalism,” democracy itself will suffer and fall either as “collateral damage” or as an intentional target of the crafty demagogue or dictator. As we will also see, though, political theology can be a defense or a weapon in that war.

Whatever the ills of twenty-first century politics, however, political theology is not the requisite prescription, if only, as we have seen, because there is no agreement as to what political theology even prescribes. Bradley and Cerella remind us that thinkers have offered it as anything

from an unashamed apology for a pre-modern Christian philosophy (John Milbank), a theological genealogy of the modern liberal order (Giorgio Agamben), an irreducible transcendental remainder within the self-definition of the secular (De Vries, 1999), to a necessary fiction or fantasy through which we must pass in order to enter a new radically materialist politics (Slavoj Žižek).⁴²

We can summarily dismiss the first offering on that list, for three good reasons. One, various pre-modern (and modern) societies and communities

³⁸ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report On Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984 [1979]), xxiv.

³⁹ Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, 46.

⁴⁰ Kahn, *The Future of Illusion*, 1.

⁴¹ Bradley and Cerella, “The Future of Political Theology,” 206.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 205.

throughout history have attempted to institute a Christian government, with so little success—and so much disaster—that secularism seemed like a preferable alternative. Two, there is no consensus on what a Christian government or society would be, since (a) there is no consensus on what the relationship between Christianity and government or society should be and (b) there is no consensus *on what Christianity is*. Three, on any construction whatsoever, political theology cannot be equated with Christianity. As our all-too-brief tour of religions illustrated above, and as we will survey in more depth below, Christianity is not the only religion that could underwrite and has underwritten a political community.

This takes us to a more elemental complaint with political theology: it speciously expands “theology”—and more narrowly only Christian theology—to encompass all religion and sometimes even all symbolic or transcendent thought. We cannot, for instance, except in the most metaphorical way, regard Tikopian *mana* or Merino/Betsileo *hasina* as “theology” (if we take that term seriously as “knowledge of god[s]”), and many religions include no gods at all. It is sloppy and presumptuous to use “theology” to label this array of religious concepts; better it might be to use a more generic term like animism (the belief in spiritual beings) or animatism (the belief in spiritual forces) of which gods and their theologies are a subset (see Chapter 8). We must then come down on the side of March, again writing from an Islamic studies perspective, who holds that the term “political theology” is “something of a misnomer.... For there is often little *logos* in political theology, indeed, very little *theos*. Political theology traffics in analogies, symbols, and imputations of meaning. It does not traffic very much in formal theology.”⁴³ Schmitt himself is a prime case of political theology without actual theology.

The situation resembles Samuli Schielke’s assessment of the anthropology of Islam, that “there is too much Islam in the anthropology of Islam,” in the sense that everything that people in Islamic societies do tends to be blamed on Islam.⁴⁴ Likewise, there is too much theology in this misnamed political theology, in the sense that everything that people in political communities do tends to be attributed to their god-concepts. Accordingly, Bradley and Cerella further explain that there is no unity on the supposed relationship between politics and theology (or we should say from now on, religion) in political theology:

it seems to encompass everything from a formal, structural or homological analogy between the religious and the political, a historical,

⁴³ March, “Genealogies of Sovereignty in Islamic Political Theology,” 294.

⁴⁴ Samuli Schielke, “Second Thoughts about the Anthropology of Islam, or How to Make Sense of Grand Schemes in Everyday Life,” Working Papers No. 2 (Zentrum Moderner Orient, 2010), 1.

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genealogical or sociological relation, a psychoanalytic lack, surplus or work of mourning, to a much stronger ontological or metaphysical sense that the religious constitutes a permanent or necessary condition of the political.⁴⁵

Now we near the heart of the matter. Political theology does not, including in the work of Schmitt, refer to literal gods or even to religion. “Every power is transcendent; the Transcendent is power,”⁴⁶ writes Schmitt, *but not every instance of power, or of transcendence, is divine.*

How then should we conceive political theology and recover its usefulness for understanding contemporary politics? As Schmitt indicates, and as Newman explicates, “political theology is not so much a problem of religion in modern societies as a problem of *power*—not only ... the power embodied in the concept of sovereignty, but also the new forms of governmental, economic, and technological power that emerge with the modern state.”⁴⁷ And power is no less mysterious, and no more or less in need of legitimation, when we add or remove god(s).

Victoria Kahn encourages us to contemplate political theology through the concept and practice of “poiesis,” by which she means the Hobbesian view that “we can only know what we make ourselves.”⁴⁸ From this vantage, the problem and mystery of politics is that *we humans* have created political structures—laws, offices, institutions, governments, the state itself—but we do not fully comprehend how or by what right we have done so. What is the authority, what is *our* authority? Understood this way, our political community, indeed our entire social system, is built over a Schmittian or Nietzschean void, and it gives us a bout of Nietzschean nausea to realize it. Few people, of course, ever get that far; they would be like the rare madmen in the streets announcing the death of the Christian god. But the lesson, and a salutary lesson I think, is that the entire project of political theology “is inseparable from reflection on the human capacity for creating artistic fictions, *including the fiction of a theologically grounded political order.*”⁴⁹ And this lesson is the very premise of my chosen discipline, anthropology, which teaches that all social facts are human constructions, integrated and perpetuated only because and as long as humans trust them and practice them.

⁴⁵ Bradley and Cerella, “The Future of Political Theology,” 205.

⁴⁶ Carl Schmitt, *Glossarium. Aufzeichnungen der Jahre 1947–1951* [*Glossarium. Diaries of the Years 1947–1951*] (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1991), 1801.

⁴⁷ Newman, *Political Theology*, 19.

⁴⁸ Kahn, *The Future of Illusion*, 3.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 21, emphasis added.

So we must take a broader view of political theology than the explicit religious foundations of political order. Political theology, in Kahn's words once more,

names something more than a structural relationship between, though less than a substantial identity of, politics and theology: the persistent haunting of liberal modernity by something in excess of the law, an exception that is then analogized not only to the miracle, grace, or some other figure of transcendence but also, in the register of immanence, to mere life, creaturely life, biopower or bios.⁵⁰

We can discern more clearly now that political theology, when done with eyes wide open, is precisely an exercise in analyzing the artistic fiction, the artifice, of politics. This analysis recruits religion, to be sure, when partisans of religion enter the field, but it also recruits religion indirectly, almost accidentally, in the form of metaphors and homologies and in the absorption of the discourse of religion. As I gather Schmitt himself recognizes when he declares that all concepts of the modern state are secularized theological concepts, the state or the sovereign is *like* a god in that it/he/she speaks the law into existence by an act of will; *like* a god (in some versions of theism but by no means all), the sovereign can breach the law in a way that is *like* a divine miracle. Or the flaw might be more a matter of confusing part for whole. For instance, in a series of publications Paul Kahn proclaims that the nature and engine of politics is sacrifice: the sovereign is "a hungry god, and we remain willing to feed it our children."⁵¹ Now, while the sovereign and the modern secular state do ask much from us, including sometimes our lives, sacrifice is not the only or essential aspect of religion, let alone of theology, and representing political authority as a bloodthirsty god is the epitome of metaphor or poetry.

Moreover, people cannot help but use the vocabulary at hand, with its connotations and semantic ranges, so terms like power and transcendence evoke a whole religious discourse or frame for people who "speak the language" of, whose consciousness is colonized by, that religion. Thus when a new political formation like a monarchical state or a secular republic emerges, it is almost inescapable that it will adopt some of the language and imitate some of the institutional structures of the ambient religion, resulting in Bradley and Cerrella's historical/genealogical relation above. This is one way of interpreting what Andrew March means when he says that political concepts are transferred from religion *either as presence or absence*, for the absence of a god or other spirit or spiritual force is just as palpable as the

⁵⁰ Kahn, *The Future of Illusion*, 4.

⁵¹ Paul W. Kahn, *Out of Eden: Adam and Eve and the Problem of Evil* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 210.

presence for people who are culturally and historically attuned to it. In the end, March is correct when he characterizes political theology, now re-imagined, as “a call to explore the symbolic dimension of politics, the crypto-theological origins of political concepts and practices, or the ways in which certain political practices ... come to have meaning for us and other ones do not.”⁵²

Ironically, there is also too much *politics* in political theology, and definitely too much “state” and “sovereignty.” To begin with the latter, “sovereignty” is really not part of the mainstream political debate in the United States today; except maybe for border security (e.g., Trump’s wall) and membership in multilateral organizations (e.g., Trump’s diatribes against the World Health Organization), Americans do not particularly worry about a loss of sovereignty. Sovereignty is, arguably, a more immediate issue in some European countries under the shadow of the European Union, and sovereignty is a central concept for many Native American peoples in their struggles with and against the American state. Indeed, as Schmitt admits—which is germane to his entire argument—sovereignty in the classical sense of Louis XIV’s “*l’état, c’est moi*” no longer exists, and I am not sure that many citizens want it back again.

There is specifically too much “state” in political theology, which is to be expected in a world where the state is the dominant political form. It is not, of course, the only political form in human history and even today has no monopoly on politics or on power more generally. Nicholas Wolterstorff instructs us that the state is a “governance-authority structure” but is certainly not unique in that regard.⁵³ The state, it is true, enjoys “the authority to govern,” but “authority to govern extends beyond governance-authority structures, and authority in general extends beyond authority to govern.”⁵⁴ We might add, following Weber, that power in general extends beyond either authority or authority to govern, an insight that Michel Foucault develops into a more comprehensive model of *governmentality* or all of the ways in which our conduct is audited, disciplined, and controlled. Governmentality operates both “below” and “above” the state: at the sub- or intra-state level, corporations, educational institutions, medical facilities and many more sites exercise it, while at the super- or trans-state level, it is exercised by multi-national organizations and religions (e.g., the Catholic Church) among others. If there is anything special about the modern state, it is what Wolterstorff describes as its ideology of public governance or of “governing the public” (as opposed to managing merely the employees of a corporation or the devotees of a religion). That is, everyone within its

⁵² March, “Genealogies of Sovereignty in Islamic Political Theology,” 293–94.

⁵³ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *The Mighty and the Almighty: An Essay in Political Theology* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 47.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

territory is subject to its jurisdiction, its sovereignty, and when “the state issues a directive to the public and someone within the territorial jurisdiction of the state wishes to protest that directive, there is never a procedure for appealing to any institution other than the state itself.”⁵⁵ That may be the most “divine” of the state’s qualities, but it also renders political theology rather moot, as the state negates the basic political-theological claim that there is anything *outside of* or *beyond* the state to which it must explain or justify itself. The modern state, whether or not a hungry god, aspires to be a self-sufficient one.

But our argument here is not about the specialness of the state but about its very unspecialness. The same legitimation problems face pre-state as well as sub-state and trans-state political orders. Ancient and pre-modern chiefdoms and kingdoms dealt with them through devices like *mana* and *hasina* (sometimes practicing sacrifice, including human sacrifice, to display and enact the ruler’s power over life and death). Political figures, parties, and institutions deriving their authority from religion, race, ethnicity, class, or any source whatsoever were and are all vulnerable to legitimation crises: all may eventually be called to the stand to justify themselves, and all will find their assertions of power to equally groundless, equally mysterious.

Just as “theology” is a proxy for religion and for symbolism/transcendence in general, “state” is a surrogate for society and social institutions taken in their totality. It is not just the state, or politics or law more broadly, that is at stake and that risks redefinition if not disintegration but any and every social institution and value, including gender categories and roles, racial hierarchies or lack thereof, language, marriage, and the rest. The scope of political theology is too narrow in focusing on government while all of the social order seems to be thrown up in the air, leaving us uncertain about what will land again and in what condition.

All of this takes us to the final point. American politics may be and probably is in a moment of crisis, but few if any Americans encounter it as quite a “legitimation” crisis. Still fewer, as noted, suffer it as a crisis of sovereignty. In fact, if anything, there is *not enough* sovereignty for many Americans, who would fix the problem with walls and bilateral treaties that “win.” I am not even sure that we should call it a “political” crisis, let alone a theological or political-theological one (although no doubt theology or religion is in crisis in America too). For most Americans (and other peoples of the world), it is a more diffuse threat, a more generalized anxiety. The experience is less a loss of legitimation/sovereignty than a *loss of stability*. The world is changing, rapidly and not for the better. Things that seemed dependable a generation or two ago—like full-time jobs, pensions, Social

⁵⁵ Wolterstorff, *The Mighty and the Almighty*, 59.

Security, and such—are fading or already gone. Forces beyond our control, maybe beyond our comprehension, such as globalization and neoliberalism, seem to rule our lives. Other countries that were recently jokes if not nearly unreal ghosts to Americans, such as China and India, are on the rise, while vanquished enemies like Russia are resurgent again, all challenging America’s “rightful” place as the dominant and richest country on earth. What was supposed to be “the American century” after victory in the Cold War (who today remembers the hubristic PNAC or Project for a New American Century?) already feels like the American senility.

In a word that social scientists use more frequently these days, life feels *precarious*. This precarity is experienced less at the level of politics and more at the level of economics and of lifestyle. It begins, in the assessment of many scholars, with work and income, or what Andrew Ross calls “the new geography of work.” Since the 1970s, with initiatives of down-sizing, right-sizing, off-shoring, etc. employers have eliminated jobs while shifting costs (e.g., the cost of health care or retirement) and risks back onto employees, by providing fewer jobs, fewer benefits, and/or more irregular, contract, or part-time work (including what we have come to call, and to a degree celebrate as, the side hustle or the gig economy, like driving for Uber, renting our homes on Airbnb, or selling on Etsy). Simultaneously, for budgetary as well as ideological reasons, the state is abandoning its function of guaranteeing services and standards of living (e.g., through cutting welfare programs or rescinding regulations and consumer protections). In the estimation of Ross, precarity entails features of low-wage work increasingly intruding into the middle class; the result is heightened vulnerability for individuals and families and, too often, intensified inequality and poverty, leading to the growth of a mass “precariat” (as opposed to proletariat), a population “somehow linked by shared concerns about the insecurity of all aspects of their lives.”⁵⁶

While government has certainly not prevented it, government is not exclusively responsible for it, and the reputed “failure” of government is often a matter of expecting the state to do things that it actually cannot do. Corporations, flexing their governmentality, effectively and sometimes intentionally rip the stability from under the feet of workers. Sharryn Kasmir chronicles this phenomenon in an American Saturn automobile factory. Saturn, a subsidiary of General Motors, built a plant in Tennessee, requiring many workers to uproot from their homes and communities in northern “Rust Belt” areas. Then the company got employees to sign contracts separate from the national union, surrendering pay and benefits, while squeezing the small town of Spring Hill, Tennessee for tax relief and free services (road and sewage system). Even at that, Saturn announced that its

⁵⁶ Andrew Ross, “The New Geography of Work: Power to the Precarious?” *Theory, Culture, & Society* 25, no. 7/8 (2008), 34–35.

decision to build was “provisional,” and sure enough in 2009 the plant was shuttered for bankruptcy reorganization, with a plan to reopen with 1,800 employees instead of the original 7,200. Meanwhile those employees had been subjected to various kinds of insecurity. The apparently generous offer of cooperation with management fostered divisions among workers while obfuscating the real divide between labor and management. Non-union subcontractors were hired, and a two-tiered wage scale was established, paying new hires less than incumbent workers. The constant threat of layoffs and plant closures, known as “whipsawing,” kept workers and towns nervous, competing against each other for survival. Relocation of workers fractured relationships and communities, while shift work and long commutes strained and often broke marriages. Workers became isolated from their peers, with little socializing outside of work. And host towns realized little benefit from factories, only higher rents, property taxes, and utility costs. In the end, Kasmir concludes, Saturn—and hardly only Saturn—engaged in deliberate “geographic displacement, disorganization, and individualization.”⁵⁷

This story, which is just one of a litany of similar tales, demonstrates how far we are from issues of legitimation and sovereignty. Instead, we are deep in the domain of insecurity and a visceral sense of—to use one of Trump’s favorite scare words—*losing*. From vacant factories and depressed coal towns to stagnant incomes and opioid epidemics, a large swath of America is less concerned with legitimating the state than with—to use one of Trump’s most beloved words—*winning* (or increasing, just surviving). More importantly, our story of American work and American worries illustrates how unsatisfying political theology is as a solution. Even a literal return to a god as the bulwark for the political community does not and cannot address these economic and lifeworld tribulations. It is the wrong tonic for the ailment. More fundamentally, however, a god or a religion cannot provide the missing stability *because religions and gods are as essentially unstable as any other institution or concept*. If, as Michael Freeden argues in our opening epigraph, the goal of politics, and especially of Schmittian sovereignty, is *finality* by means of *decision*—that is, settling the issue or solving the problem once and for all by a decisive act of will—any such finality, whether based on politics or religion, is a chimera. Religions may proffer their gods (or other beings and forces) as the rock of ages, but rocks age and erode too. That is to say, beliefs about any particular god, say the Christian god, change over time, and gods themselves come and go (nobody much talks about securing our government, and definitely not our jobs or social status, with obeisance to Odin or Zeus). At any given

⁵⁷ Sharryn Kasmir, “The Saturn Automobile Plant and the Long Dispossession of US Autoworkers,” in *Blood and Fire: Toward a Global Anthropology of Labor*, ed. Sharryn Kasmir and August Carbonella (New York and London: Berghahn, 2014), 242.

moment, people disagree about what gods are and want, not to mention the disparate and competing religious beliefs in a multicultural society like the United States; in other words, an appeal to the Christian god will not satisfy Muslims, Hindus, or Wiccans and vice versa. And—as history has amply illustrated—gods and all religious beliefs, offices, and institutions are vulnerable to their own legitimation crises; their authority is in no way whatsoever solid and unquestionable, and when questioned they melt into air as surely as any secular authority. So the last thing we need in a time of disbelief and distrust of grand narratives is more credulity.

Looking Forward (to Trump)

This introductory chapter has been an excursion through political theology, with few direct references to Trump, but the relevance has hopefully been evident. Trump is not a king, not even a sovereign, and certainly not a god, and the relation between Trump and religion is oblique at best. He seldom invokes a deity and cannot cite a verse of scripture. His popularity among Christians, particularly evangelicals, suggests that there is something about him that appeals to the faithful, yet he shows no signs of establishing a theocracy or even governing on Christian values (like honesty and charity). Political theology in the strict scholarly sense seems barely applicable to him and his presidency.

Yet, the deeper message of political theology, specifically of the reformed political theology that we have been fashioning here, is highly relevant and revealing. Unless they are taken for granted, accepted and believed without questioning or close inspection, the state, political institutions, and law, and the informal, ubiquitous, and crucial norms and traditions of political and ethical behavior are fragile and easily fractured. A leader with sufficient disregard, even disdain, for them—we are learning with shock and dismay—can consolidate power to ignore and overturn them, pulling the levers of government (the Department of Justice, the courts, the military) against them and against civil society (the media, the two-party system, etc.). Without external, let alone supernatural, support and justification, the state and the law prove to be defenseless against the onslaught of a Schmittian decider, one who, like a sovereign, produces political acts that need not be based on, are heedless of and are unconstrained by, “normal” law. And as both Schmitt and Hobbes apprehend that authority, not truth, drives politics, so truth is no protection against sheer political will. Instead, we get an unobstructed view of the deep non-rationality if not irrationality of politics and of society in general (that is, not driven by facts and logic but by beliefs and values, interest and identity, and emotion; sorry, Habermas, but the public sphere is not exclusively or primarily a space of communicative rationality), where truth

is the hapless victim of the exceptional decider, of the perpetual disruption and interminable exception.

In the chapters that follow, we will explore the Trumpian exception in its many locations and formations, tacking back and forth between Trump specifically and political theology—or politics and religion—generally. Some chapters will deal primarily with Trump, some more tangentially, but they will all contribute to an analysis of political power in the present moment. The first chapter examines actual political theologies as they have appeared throughout American history, setting the stage for a character like Trump. This leads to the second chapter and the perennial question of whether Trump really is an exception, an aberration, or a continuation or completion of a long-term trend in American politics. No radical disjuncture or aporia from American political history, we will consider the Trump phenomenon as a “resonant rupture” at most.

To further illustrate the point, the third chapter will take an international perspective, investigating the rise and spread of right-wing populism around the world. Trump accordingly emerges as one incarnation of a global trend, related to equally global economic and cultural forces much bigger than one man or one country. The fourth chapter will subject the Trump phenomenon, which in many ways harkens back to an idyllic (if not imaginary) 1950s America, to an analysis via some of the breakthrough 1950s scholarship on authoritarians, agitators, and true believers by scholars who lived through the traumas of the mid-twentieth century.

The fifth chapter will ask a question that most observers seem to think has been definitively answered: who are Trump’s supporters? But a closer inspection teaches us that the appeal of Trump, or at least a vote for Trump, is not as easily understood as we usually assume. Studying “Trumpland” with the ethnographic tools of anthropology reveals not only previously undiscovered details about its denizens but a more refined picture of how politics and identity really work. The sixth chapter turns to one of the signature traits of Trump and his regime, his and their profligate lying, and discusses some reasons why lies are good (or effective) strategy.

The final two chapters return to our reformation of political theology. In the seventh chapter we go beyond theistic propositions and “belief” to interrogate the power of myth and ritual and to relate them to Trump’s public performances. And chapter eight transcends gods altogether to propose that other religious/mythical characters might tell us more about Trump the person and politician, namely the shaman and the trickster, who are precisely beings for an uncanny globalized neoliberal present. Shamans and tricksters alert us to the impermanence and abnormality of reality, urging us not to take ourselves or our leaders too seriously while learning to live with disorder and mischief. Not that this knowledge makes Trump’s chicanery any more pleasant or acceptable.

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