

Political Theology: New Horizons

In 1922, German jurist, political theorist and member of the Nazi party Carl Schmitt famously asserted: "all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts". This quote, as well as the book from which it is taken (*Politische Theologie. Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität*) are pivotal for what has, in recent years, developed into a stratified research field, called political theology. The notion of "secularization" in Schmitt's analysis proved exceptionally fertile, due to its capacity to highlight the ambivalent nature of the process assumed to liberate politics from religious patterns of authority and belief. Thinkers such as Max Weber, Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, Simone Weil, Johann Baptist Metz, Hans Blumenberg, Jacob Taubes and Giorgio Agamben have given important contributions to this line of thought. In light of the most recent development on the global political arena – full-scale wars, a dramatic political polarization and a pending ecological collapse – the critical examination of hidden paradigms of thought and structures of beliefs influencing today's political decision-making, is more relevant than ever.

But the question of how we should understand the presence or absence of religious and/or Christian theological structures of thought in contemporary society, more broadly speaking, would benefit by being illuminated from a wider variety of perspectives. In this Workshop, scholars in Ancient Greek, Bible studies, History of Religion, Law and Literature will present their work – of political, feminist, historical, esthetic or religious relevance – alongside theologians and philosophers conducting research within different sectors of the field political theology. By creating this unique opportunity for a cross-disciplinary conversation about urgent political and theological issues, the hope is to challenge, complement and vitalize the contemporary discussion on political theology.

1) Kurt Appel

After Metz:

The Biblical Language of the Impossible and the Creation of Alternative Worlds

The various forms of newer Christian-inspired Political theology (Liberation Theology, New Political Theology, Intercultural Theology, Feminist Theology, Anti-colonial Theology, Black Theology) highlight the political dimension of Christianity and draw attention to the fact that in the political struggles of our time, an alleged neutrality is not possible and serves the cause of the powerful. This is particularly evident in the realm of historiography, where the voices of the marginalised and oppressed have not been heard. In recent decades, the attempt by the traditional churches to establish themselves in political disputes as the voice of the voiceless has probably also been an attempt to regain lost moral credibility. However, this effort has not led to a renewed significance of the established churches in Europe. In general, it can be stated that the global political landscape is currently being redefined and that liberal democracy and its societal pathos of freedom, which the churches have begun to embrace after a long period of resistance, are in a serious crisis that is also a crisis of representation. In his contribution, Kurt Appel identifies some of the causes of this crisis and outlines consequences for a Political Theology after Metz, insofar as it does not want to be a mere appendix to secular political theories of freedom. In this context, the thesis is argued that the future of a Christian theology today is measured by the biblical capacity of

generating and creating alternative worlds that are able to articulate the “impossible” and produce community-building horizons of meaning, passions and tension in their narratives.

2) **Jayne Svenungsson**

Professor of Systematic Theology, Lund University. Her research, she combines studies in theology, philosophy and history. In recent years, the focus of her research has been on philosophy of history and political theology, including the ways in which apocalyptic and messianic motifs play out in modern Western philosophy and political thinking. She is currently PI of the research program "At the End of the World: A Transdisciplinary Approach to the Apocalyptic Imaginary in the Present and Past".

Prophetic Political Theology: Daniel Bensaïd’s Alternative Radicality

When political theology was revitalized in the early 2000s, it reflected an increased theoretical interest in Carl Schmitt and his understanding of the political. Over the past twenty-five years, political theology as an academic discourse has largely remained within a Schmittian paradigm, placing emphasis on categories such as exception, disinvestment and deactivation. In my presentation, I will suggest that this paradigm of political theology is becoming increasingly obsolete and that the urgency of the present moment calls for another kind of radicality.

This also raises the question of what an alternative political theology may look like, one better suited to confront the challenges of the present time. I will pursue this question by turning to the Jewish Trotskyist thinker Daniel Bensaïd (1946–2010). In contrast to what is sometimes explicitly referred to as ‘apocalyptic political theology’, I will make a case for what may be described as a ‘prophetic political theology’. In particular, I am interested in exploring the resources Bensaïd’s thinking – at the crossroads of Trotskyism and a certain strand of Jewish prophetic and messianic thinking – offers for reconsidering what radical commitment may entail in a time of expanding far-right nationalism.

3) **Peter Jackson Rova**

Professor in History of religions at the Department of Ethnology, History of Religions and Gender studies, Stockholm university. His research is focused on the philological study of Indo-European religions, with a special emphasis on ancient Indian and Iranian religions, the religions of ancient Greece and Rome, and Old Norse religion. Additionally, his research shows a general theoretical and conceptual concerns in the study of religion, such as divination, eschatology or the rhetorical dimensions of myth and ritual.

Superterrestrial Polities

Or: The Subterranean Poetics of Politics

Starting from Carl Schmitt’s claim that “[a]ll significant political concepts are secularized theological concepts,” (Politische Theologie I [2nd ed. 1934], 49) an attempt is made to examine the implications of this proposition beyond the modern idea of the rule of law and Christian theology in other and prior (pagan) territories of political discourse. This

retrospective approach provides an opportunity to further explore if (or rather how) the systematic affinity between theological and political concepts in modern theories of statecraft correlates with the eschatological poetics of polity that implicitly (subterraneously) informs the first systematic attempt at political theorizing in the Western canon of political philosophy, namely Plato's Republic. By briefly cross-examining key passages in the 2nd book of Republic (363c-365c and 369c) and Phaedrus (247 c-d), examples are given to clarify how the ambiguous understandings of a "place" (in the double topographical and rhetorical sense of Gr. τόπος) reflect back on how the city, state, or city-state has been envisioned not just as a site of governance, but also as an intangible object of eschatological imagination.

4) Daniel Kuran

Tales of Divine Sovereignty. Niobe and Korah (read by Walter Benjamin)

My paper departs from Walter Benjamin's essay Towards the Critique of Violence (1921), which is considered to be a key text for many discussions on Political Theology in recent decades. Many authors, often readers and critiques of Carl Schmitt, put forth their interpretations of Benjamin's essay, among them Derrida, Agamben, Butler, and Menke, to name just a few. Almost all interpreters refer to the distinction between mythical and divine violence that appears towards the end of Benjamin's essay. This conceptual distinction that is as essential to Benjamin's text as it is enigmatic and sometimes unsettling, is introduced by Benjamin alongside the distinction between myth and God. The latter opposition is accompanied by a set of conceptual oppositions (such as between law and justice) that downright fuel philosophical interpretations regularly. However, the opposition between mythical and divine violence is also related by Benjamin to two narratives: the myth of Niobe and the biblical narrative of Korah (Num 16). Although they are key, both narratives have received significantly less attention than the conceptual oppositions of mythical and divine violence, with important recent exceptions (Britt, Butler). My paper will show that the two tales of Niobe and Korah shed light on each other and on the concepts of Benjamin's essay as well as on the related issue of divine sovereignty. The paper is part of an ongoing habilitation thesis that attempts to put forth a distinction between the sovereignty of God and power, building, among others, on Benjamin and Metz.

5) Sandra Lehmann

Politics and the Hyperbolé of Being

In my talk I will advocate a hyperbolic ontology and draw some political conclusions from it. A hyperbolic understanding of reality implies that every being is characterized by an inner transcendence that makes it neither reducible to any other being nor to what it itself is in its temporal unfolding. This inner transcendence, I will argue, is the effect of the existence of every being. For it is the most common characteristic of existence that it cannot be reduced to anything objective and, being beyond any genus, ultimately escapes any conceptual framework. Since everything that is real also exists, it shares this general characteristic of existence. One can speak of hyperbolic ontology as a variation of pantheism and as holistic pluralism. However, the "holon" or the whole of this holism is not absolute. Rather, it is open to a constitutive, somewhat hyperpositive difference from itself. Applying this model to the

political, it is possible to imagine a new community based on the pillars of cooperation, individual development, and an inner transcendence that animates them.

6) Eric Cullhed

Professor of Ancient Greek, Uppsala university. In his research, he has mainly specialized on the Homeric epics and their legacy. His work is driven by a curiosity to venture into new domains, methodologies, and materials, and he has conducted research on Latin American poetry, aesthetics, philosophical psychology, and trained machine learning models to restore lost segments of Ancient Greek papyri and inscriptions. His current research is focused on the history of weeping.

Why Is Weeping a “Mystery”?

Researchers studying human weeping—in fields ranging from the history of emotions to neurobiology—agree on little except one thing: crying is a mystery. There seems to be no end to the stream of books and articles promising to explain, unravel, or demystify this deeply enigmatic behavior once and for all. It is possible that this reflects a simple fact: some aspects of human experience resist precise verbal elucidation. Our impulse—or rather, our blight—to respond to distress with a biologically primordial cascade of sobs, howls, and tears may belong to this category. However, it may also reflect a culturally specific conception of this bodily mechanism. Weeping is a pan-cultural phenomenon, but is “the mystery of weeping” a pan-cultural idea, or rather a bequeathal of the early church and its notion of the gift of tears as an “obscure and difficult matter,” as John Klimakos put it in *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*? This presentation takes its cue—perhaps trivially but hopefully not unbearably so—from Carl Schmitt’s insights on the theological origins of numerous central political concepts. Through historical and comparative analysis of weeping theories, the aim is to assess the extent to which the modern psychology of weeping involves similar imperceptible cultural moorings.

7) Mattias Martinson

Professor of Systematic Theology and Studies in Worldviews, Uppsala university. His main research interests are philosophical and cultural theology, critical theory and continental philosophy. He has written several books, combining reflection on Christian beliefs, continental philosophy and postmodern cultural theory, as well as text books in systematic theology. Martinson is currently the Deputy Vice Rector of Humanities and Social Sciences.

The Sound and Silence of Trumpism. Music, Politics and Theology

Donald Trump is often described as a politician that transcends conventional political categories. His presidency, rhetoric, and continued influence on American and international politics have drastically undermined the way we understand political expectations, communication, power, and ideology. Trumpism is not merely about policies or party affiliation; it is about performance, spectacle and violence through strategic use of the fragmented public space that we face in the present. Such a strategic use may be discussed from several angles, and many are those who have tried (in vain) to make sense of it all in

view of more traditional lines of thought. However, Trump's behavior and his communication exceed the usual categories, and I will therefore in try to explore his political discourse from a completely different angle, namely through the lenses of musicology and political theology, using figures like John Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Luigi Nono and Theodor Adorno to frame some aspects of Trump's discourse that may reach beyond what we think of as discourse. The experimental questions I pose are: What does Trumpism sound like? What is revealed and concealed by its sound and silence? And how does its violent performance relate to political theology? What I will suggest is obviously not that Trump's political message and Trumpism would in any way be possible to white-wash or salvage if one only dared to use another perspective – far from it. I rather think that the traditional forms of political critique ultimately run the risk of legitimatizing this uncanny and truly threatening phenomenon. I have no other ambition than to put this mess in view of sonorous and musical concepts and tropes, in order to reveal something more of its profound destructiveness as it performs theological brutality in the guise of democratic political discourse.

8) Tormod Johansen

Doctor of Public Law, and lecturer in constitutional law and administrative law at the law programme at Gothenburg university. Apart from a research interest in public law, especially the relationship between constitutional issues and administrative issues, he also has a legal theoretical interest, both in the public law field and in general legal philosophy. He is part of the research project "The End of Law" with Mårten Björk and research program "At the End of the World" (PI Jayne Svenungsson).

The Secular Apocalypse of Nuclear Sovereignty

In an era of renewed awareness of nuclear war and growing calls for nuclear proliferation from mainstream Western leaders, this paper revisits a diverse range of texts that consider the existential and political dimensions of nuclear weapons. I begin with Günther Anders' "Theses for the Atomic Age" (1962), in which he argues that nuclear war represents a secular apocalypse—both in the attenuated sense of catastrophic destruction and in the original, thicker sense of revelation, exposing the fragility of human existence. I then turn to Hans Morgenthau's "Death in the Nuclear Age" (1961), which foregrounds the apocalyptic logic embedded within secular liberal ideology, and read it alongside Edith Wyschogrod's work from the 1980s on "man-made mass death" and the construction of "death worlds" under the persistent shadow of nuclear annihilation.

Building on these conceptual foundations, I explore a striking reference to nuclear proliferation in H.L.A. Hart's *The Concept of Law* (1961) and connect it to recent interpretations of nuclear sovereignty. In particular, I engage Garry Wills' notion of "bomb power," Paul W. Kahn's argument that modern warfare exists in a state of chronic illegality, and Elaine Scarry's concept of "thermonuclear sovereignty." These help illuminate the ways in which nuclear weapons shape the very structure of legal and political authority in the global context.

As the contemporary world order faces renewed instability, I bring these discussions together in a politico-theological reading of the International Court of Justice's 1996 advisory opinion on the legality of nuclear weapons. By drawing on the apocalyptic themes traced above, I argue that the Court's reasoning reflects deeper tensions between sovereignty, legality, and the existential stakes of nuclear armament in the modern age.

9) **Katerina Koci**

Wielding Patriarchy's Tools: Sarah, Hagar, and Atwood's Dystopian Women

This presentation explores the dark symbiosis between victimhood and perpetration by juxtaposing biblical figures Sarah and Hagar with Margaret Atwood's haunting characters Aunt Lydia and Janine. In Atwood's theocratic Gilead, we witness the "tyrannical and maternal" Aunt Lydia—tortured, complicit in murder, yet wielding tremendous power—alongside Janine, repeatedly broken yet briefly emboldened when she conceives. These modern literary creations mirror the ancient dynamic where Sarah, herself prostituted and made infertile, expels the pregnant Hagar who had "looked with contempt" upon her mistress. Drawing on Kristeva's theory that the "eternal debt to the woman-mother... makes a woman more vulnerable within the symbolic order," I demonstrate how patriarchal violence replicates through female hands across millennia. Atwood's dystopian vision—inspired by her travels through Soviet Eastern Europe—reveals that "women will gladly take positions of power over other women... in systems in which women as a whole have scant power." This comparative analysis suggests that liberation demands not violence that "restores agency" but rather its conscious rejection, even at profound personal cost.

10) **Sigrid Schottenius Cullhed**

Associate professor and senior lecturer in literary studies at Uppsala University. Between 2020 and 2023, she led the literary research project "Philomela Returns: Ancient Myth and the Public Secret of Rape", which explored literary representations of sexual violence in ancient Greek and Roman literature and the classical tradition. She is also research leader for the EU project "MotherNet: Developing a New Network of Researchers on Contemporary European Motherhood."

Philomela and the unspeakable

Experiences of violence, particularly sexual violence, are often considered difficult to articulate due to fundamental aspects of human psychology and social relations. The mental wound inflicted by such events, compounded by social emotions like shame, enshrouds them in silence. This presentation investigates the historical construction of sexual violence as unspeakable by tracing its origins to Roman religious norms and taboos, and it examines how these legacies continue to shape contemporary understandings and lived experiences.

Using the myth of Philomela as a case study, the analysis explores how rape was codified as unspeakable in antiquity, especially in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where the Roman concept of *nefas*—"that which must not be spoken"—frames both the act and its aftermath. From medieval retellings to modern trauma narratives, the myth's reception reveals a persistent

tension between enforced silence and the imperative for testimony. By relating this tension to Schmitt's political theology, the paper interrogates whether unspeakability arises solely from mental and social dynamics or is also rooted in theological frameworks. If so, reconsidering this legacy may provide new insights into how narratives of sexual violence are formed, who is granted a voice, and how silence is perpetuated.

11) Anna Sjöberg

Organizer of the Workshop. Holds a PhD in systematic theology from Lund's university, with research interests in secularization theory, political theology and questions of philosophical and theological methodology. She is currently studying the theological dimensions of the work of Ivan Illich in an international postdoc-project, conducted at Uppsala University and "Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society", University of Vienna.

Ivan Illich as a political theologian:

a close reading of selected passages from *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich as told to David Cayley*

Ivan Illich (1926-2002), priest, philosopher and historian, was an influential cultural critic, famous especially for his severe critique of modern Western service society and its pillar institutions, such as medicine (*Medical Nemesis*, 1974) and the school system (*Deschooling Society*, 1971). On persistent entreaties from his friend, the radio journalist David Cayley, Illich, close to the end of his life, assented to present his views on Christianity, theology and the process of secularization, as he had come to understand them during his life of dedicated studies within various fields. The subsequent textual version of these interviews, *The Rivers North of the Future*, is a strange and fascinating document. His ruminations on modern secular institutions as prolongations of the Church, and modernity as a perversion of the historical subversiveness of the original Christian message, are clearly based in ardent scholarly work, but presented in an oracular tone and referred to by Illich as a set of "research hypotheses". In my presentation, I will focus both on the form and the content of Illich's "hypothesis" of secularization, as well as the relationship between these two dimensions. I will discuss how this hypothesis can be related to dominant trends within the field of contemporary political theology, and also suggest a way to read Illich that brings a certain coherence to the straggly character of his life work.

12) Isabella Bruckner

Micropolitics of the Gospel: practices of every day subversion in Michel de Certeau

This contribution examines the Jesuit intellectual Michel de Certeau (1925-1986), who would have celebrated his 100th birthday this year. Although priest and theologian, Certeau is primarily known for his research in the fields of history (of spirituality and Modern mysticism) and cultural studies. This is due to a significant biographical and theoretical change in his life at the end of the 1960s, where he transitioned from focusing on principally ecclesial audiences and dialogue partners to engaging with secular intellectual circles, convinced that a direct positive theological discourse was no longer viable. His works in the human sciences are deeply inspired by his interpretation of the biblical texts, the Christ

event, and the mystical tradition, thereby consistently following an Ignatian style of approach. In his most well-known cultural studies work, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Certeau acknowledges the reality of the “Discourse of the Capitalist” (Jacques Lacan) and the technocratic logic as fundamental paradigms of subjectivation in contemporary societies. Despite this, he dedicates the book to the “ordinary man”, the “common hero”, whom he refers to as “user” and “consumer”. Does this suggest a subjugated subject, or power of the weak? This contribution presents Certeau’s cultural research as an indirect “bottom-up” political theology which sketches the small potentials of freedom within the anonymous ingenuity of everyday life, specifically in the surprising abundance of possibilities of how to do something. Inspired by the Ignatian motto “to find God in all things,” even the most mundane activities (walking, cooking, reading, and writing, etc.) can become “micro-practices of resistance” that subtly challenge dominating power dynamics and create space for the Other.

13) **Ulrika Björk**

Ulrika Björk is a senior lecturer in philosophy at Södertörn University in Stockholm. Her main research fields are phenomenology and continental philosophy, early 20th century Jewish thought, and feminist philosophy. Her current research engages with Hannah Arendt’s problematization of tradition from the perspective of her Jewish writings.

Hannah Arendt’s Non-Secular Secularism:

The Case of Abraham

Hannah Arendt’s status and originality as a political thinker have engaged scholars intrigued by the tension she identifies between philosophy and politics, and traces back to the ancient Greek opposition between contemplative and political life (Arendt 1958, 1990; cf., e.g., Benhabib 1996; Cavarero 2002). Whereas this tension is arguably resolved by Arendt’s critical examination of truth (episteme) and opinion (doxa), as well as of the activity of thinking, another paradox seems to remain. In so far as Arendt’s political philosophy is also recognized as Jewish, it is both Greek and Hebrew in origin, both secular and non-secular (in modern terms), and of both reason and faith. Inspired by Jewish-American poet Charles Reznikoff, who describes his poetry as the offspring of a marriage between his ‘Hebrew heart’ and the English ‘speech of strangers’, Agata Bielik-Robson (2014) understands Jewish philosophy positively as “the singular predicament of a ‘third language’ in which Jewish thinkers talk Hebrew in words, concepts and arguments bequeathed to them by Greek philosophers,” and their “Christian avatars” (2014, 3, 7; cf. Reznikoff 2005; Derrida 1978, 2001). Drawing on this bilingual conception of modern Jewish philosophy, my presentation will suggest that Arendt’s originality as a political thinker stems precisely from her ‘non-secular secularism’ (cf. Scholem 1976). An interpretation of a fragment on the Biblical Abraham appearing in *The Human Condition* will advance this claim.

14) **Mårten Björk**

Researcher in Systematic theology, Lund university, and lecturer at Newman institute, Uppsala. His main research interests are political theology, secularism, and the relationship

between theology, philosophy and science. He is research leader for the project "The End of the Law", focusing on the relationship between law and theology (together with Tormod Johansen and one other researcher), and part of the Jayne Svenungsson project "At the End of the World".

A Social Interpretation of Nature:

Hans Kelsen's Critique of Political Theology and Gustav Radbruch's Metaphysics of Fleas

In 1916, the Austrian jurist Hans Kelsen criticised Gustav Radbruch, the future Minister of Justice in the so-called Weimar Republic, for embedding law in nature. This implied "a social interpretation of nature" and revived natural law; an animistic interpretation of nature as a society that should be obeyed. Kelsen, who was Jewish and, like Radbruch, a man on the political left, understood how dangerous such politicisation of nature was in a society where many wanted to turn the state into a community of homogeneous values. Radbruch had, in a short article from 1915, turned to Ivo of Kermartin, the patron saint of lawyers and abandoned children, and sketched a metaphysics of fleas. The medieval lawyer permitted insects to pester his body since they should have their share in God's creation. Radbruch turned to these insects, which later were shown to spread the so-called trench fever during the First World War, to underline that vermin could be seen as creatures with legal rights. Kelsen's German colleague could, therefore, be said to defend the religious path the Austrian scholar attacked. Still, we will see that such a "social interpretation of nature" might not lead to a naturalisation of law but to a defence of the "asociality of law". It could lead to a decoupling of the idea of the law from the state and a critique of law as law, worth defending today when, once again, the law is said to be built upon a shared system of values rather than being an instrument whose end should be to protect the individual living being as an end in itself.

15) Ida Simonsson

Hold a PhD in systematic theology from Uppsala University, and is currently lecturer in theology at University College Stockholm. In her current research, she explores the relationship between Christian theology and the market economy, with a particular focus on value theory, and against backdrop of the political-theological field of research on the historical intertwinement of Christian theology and secular society.

A theological-historical analysis of the relationship between power and value

For decades, mainstream economics has faced critique for failing to account for power relations and political institutions. Harvard Professor Kenneth Galbraith in his 1972 presidential address to the American Economic Association, articulated his critique succinctly, stating that "power being so comprehensively deployed in ... the total economy, there can no longer ... be any separation by economists between economics and politics" (Galbraith 1973, vol. 63, no. 1, p. 8). However, despite Galbraith's influence as a thinker, this argument of his has largely been ignored.

In this paper, I examine a specific aspect of this neglect: the distribution of power within the trading situation itself. My analysis proceeds in two steps. First, I scrutinize core texts of mainstream economics and demonstrate that its basic theoretical framework harbors an

implicit illusion of egalitarian trading relationships. More specifically, this illusion is embedded in marginalist value theory – one of the axioms of the neoclassical theory that dominates contemporary economics.

Second, I analyze how power in trade has been historically conceptualized in this value theory, which traces its origins to medieval theology. In that context, the analysis of power and powerlessness was central to medieval theological-economic considerations. The shifts and continuities in this theological genealogy provide theoretical counterpoints to present-day economics and reveal that there may in fact exist a little recognized index of power in contemporary economics.

16) Jakob Deibl

The 'prince' ('Fürst') as a political-theological category in Hölderlin?

The poet, philosopher and theologian Friedrich Hölderlin had great hopes for the Peace Treaty of Lunéville, which was entered into by France and the Holy Roman Empire in 1801. When he visited Regensburg, the city of the Reichstag, in 1802, he likely witnessed how the Holy Roman Empire embarked on the path towards its dissolution. It was against the backdrop of this political-theological transformation of Europe that Hölderlin began the project of writing a new "fable": it was to present a poetic geography and a "poetic view of history" (letter to Leo von Seckendorf, 12 March 1804). One of the most important political-theological categories that Hölderlin develops in his poems during this period is the figure of the prince ("Fürst"). On the basis of selected passages, we will attempt to examine the theological, political and poetic aspects of this figure.