

Beyond the Politics of Theological Despair

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Abstract

This paper critically explores the political theology of Carl Schmitt. It argues that Schmitt's analysis, which links the transcendence of God with the political concept of sovereignty, is both too nostalgic and too severe. In the place of Schmitt's political theology that disdains democracy for the failures of modern liberalism, this paper instead draws on the recent collaborative works of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri to make the case for a more thoroughgoing commitment to democracy, a commitment that goes beyond the modern liberal concept of popular sovereignty by appealing to the disparate and sometimes unruly voices of the multitude.

Introduction

[1] For many, liberal democracy is in a state of crisis (most prominently, see the groundbreaking works of Hardt and Negri 2001, 2005; see also Agamben, Badiou). Related to this crisis – which is, more broadly, a crisis within classic modern liberalism – is the question of secularism and its connection to Western-styled democracy's commitment to the separation of church and state. Gone is the post-Cold War optimism that saw the West's triumph over Soviet communism and the ensuing era of globalization as the “end of history” (Fukuyama 1993, 2006, the latter being his critical reassessment of the neoconservative movement in the United States with which he was once allied). Gone is the confidence in the United States as the global beacon of freedom. Whether we are in fact living in a “clash of civilizations,” or whether the rhetoric of the “clash of civilizations” has simply provided the pretense for the latest heightening in the militarization of society, the truth remains that a genuine, thoroughgoing commitment to democracy finds itself in a seeming perpetual state of suspension. What is more, as the Italian political philosophy Giorgio Agamben has shown, this condition is more the norm than the exception, as this suspended state of democracy, which he terms the “state of exception,” has become the working paradigm of government throughout the so-called liberal democracies in Western Europe and the United States.¹

[2] Gone too is the assumption that the more modern we become, the less religious we would become. As the conservative political commentator David Brooks writes, that secular vision was “yesterday's incorrect vision of the future.” It is for this reason that for at least the past decade there has been much discussion, both scholarly and among the broader public, about the “return of religion” (for a philosophical treatment, see Derrida and Vattimo; Janicaud *et al.*; De Vries). Even more since the attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C. on September 11, 2001, there has been increasing discussion about the proper relationship between religion and politics. This

¹For instance, Agamben writes, “Modern totalitarianism can be defined as the establishment, by means of the state of exception, of a legal civil war that allows for the elimination not only of political adversaries but of entire categories of citizens who for some reason cannot be integrated into the political system. Since then, the voluntary creation of a permanent state of emergency (though perhaps not declared in the technical sense) has become one of the essential practices of contemporary states, including so-called democratic ones.” And he continues, “Faced with the unstoppable progression of what has been called a ‘global civil war,’ the state of exception tends increasingly to appear as the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics” (2).

persistence of the religious, and the consequent religious identifications and differences that remain within society in spite of the modern forces of democracy, rationality, and secularization, exacerbates both the crisis and opportunity that contemporary liberal democracies face.

[3] This paper will make the argument that this return of religion should not be seen as a threat to modern democratic society, but on the contrary, provides the opportunity for its renewal. This renewal comes from an alternative political theology that replaces the modern concept of the sovereign with a commitment to democracy. As will be shown, this means distinguishing between liberalism and democracy, on the one hand, accepting the limitations – even crisis – that liberal democracies face, while on the other, not falsely concluding that the limitations of liberalism are necessarily endemic to democracy itself. After all, liberalism is a product of modern political thought and practice, while democracy stands as an age-old dream and challenge. Once freed from the time-bound commitments of classic modern liberalism, a more thoroughgoing and radical commitment to democracy might finally take root. In short, for every crisis there is opportunity. In this case, it is the original, and still radical, dream of democracy – namely, in the words of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, “the rule of everyone by everyone” (2005: 237) – that might again become the standard by which existing political structures and operative governments might be judged. Therefore, just as the religious has refused to be silenced or quarantined by its modern privatization and individualization, so too might the multitude find and assert its own disparate voices.

The New Paradigm of Political Theology

[4] In a symposium from 1986, the German Catholic theologian Johann Baptist Metz announced a new paradigm of theology – namely, that of political theology. When introducing this new paradigm of political theology, Metz had two distinct interests in mind. The first is the observation that much of contemporary theology is increasingly concerned with issues of its public consequences – that is to say, the appreciation of the relation between theology and power, together with the growing theological commitment to the global struggle for liberation. There is also the flip side of this realization when considering not only the public consequences of theology, but also the broader societal concern with how its own public policies are informed by certain religious presuppositions and therefore in need of greater theological scrutiny.

[5] With regard to this first observation, it seems evident that the public’s interest in religion(s) and the correlative recognition of the need for greater theological scrutiny has only grown more evident and urgent during the intervening two decades.² However, the main interest here is with Metz’s second concern, which is, namely, the shape this new paradigm of political theology is taking. As to the contemporary form of political theology, consider the often-noted argument from the German legal and political theorist Carl Schmitt, that all the important concepts of modern political thought are nothing more than secularized theological concepts (this argument was most explicitly developed

²For example, witness the recent feature essay from *The New York Times* Sunday Book Review from Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. in which he laments how Americans from all sides of the political spectrum have forgotten the importance of Reinhold Niebuhr and neglected Niebuhr’s theological critique of the myth of American innocence. Schlesinger, who is a leading and widely respected public intellectual in the U.S., identifies Niebuhr not only as “the supreme American theologian of the 20th century,” but also the person who had the single greatest influence on his own intellectual development. While this is admittedly only one isolated example, what we have here is one of the most recognizable public intellectuals in the U.S. making a plea that Americans do a better job at remembering their theology. In Schlesinger’s mind, at least, this would go a long way in helping Americans to understand and resolve a whole range of issues related to the so-called “Culture Wars” that are raging on unabated.

in Schmitt's work *Political Theology*; see Schmitt 2005).³ In other words, while contemporary politics might operate according to secular reason, it is founded on or constituted by a certain theology – specifically, a theology of a sovereign and thus transcendent God. Just as God transcends the world, so too does the sovereign stand above society – and also *outside* the law. In the words of Hardt and Negri: “The sovereign is defined *positively* as the one above whom there is no power and is thus free to decide, and *negatively* as the one potentially excepted from every social norm and rule” (2005: 330-31). Put otherwise, the politics of sovereignty is based in a theology of transcendence; but by its actualization in the political order, this theology undergoes its own process of secularization, meaning that it is morphed, transformed, and rendered unrecognizable to most. As Hardt and Negri suggest, this is not without its own problems as it provides the potential rationale for the sovereign authority's disregard, if not abuse, of “every social norm and rule.” Further, as argued by Heinrich Meier in his study of Schmitt, so long as there is an equation of politics and theology, modern political forms and institutions, not to mention governing ideologies, have the status of revealed truth closed off from critical scrutiny. For Meier, this means that Schmitt must be read as a political theologian first and foremost, and thus, attention must be paid to the theological and religious presuppositions that lie beneath Schmitt's purportedly realistic assessment of the true nature of the political.

[6] Metz's announcement of a paradigm shift to political theology provides us with the opportunity not only to take Schmitt's analysis of the political seriously, but also to ask Meier's question about the theological assumptions that undergird this analysis. If it is true that modern political thought is a form of secularized theology, then what might a critical theological scrutiny reveal about our world today? For Metz, he delineates three competing paradigms, which he identifies as the neo-Scholastic, the transcendental-idealist, and the post-idealist. The neo-Scholastic, which Metz calls “a defensive and nonproductive confrontation with modernity,” is most prevalent, reflecting the neoconservative tendencies not only within the church, but also within society at large (144). Though the neo-Scholastic is most prevalent, Metz sees the transcendental-idealist paradigm as having been “the most penetrating and influential” (144). That is because it has provided a productive engagement between theology and modernity by most directly tackling the modern challenges of existentialism, secularism, and science. However, the new challenges facing the world today require a paradigm shift to what Metz identifies as a post-idealist political theology. Among the challenges that Metz has in mind here include the Marxist challenge to epistemology that teaches us that all knowledge is bound by interest, and the Auschwitz challenge that shows us the inability of theological idealism to confront actual historical experience. In Metz's words, after Auschwitz, “there is no truth of history which one can defend, no God in history which one can worship. Theology must take seriously the negativity of history in its interruptive and catastrophic character” (149). But most significant, is what Metz calls the “Third World challenge” in which he includes the questions of exploitation, oppression, and racism, and the need for the church to cure itself of its Euro-American bias and come to recognize, perhaps for the first time, the polycentric nature of the universal church. In short, this is the contemporary challenge of globalization.

[7] Though Metz's comments are somewhat dated, his analysis sets us on the right track not only because he was one of the first to examine the importance of this new paradigm of political theology, but also because even his delineation of the three contrasting contemporary paradigms still

³Schmitt's two most widely discussed books are *The Concept of the Political* (1996a) and *Political Theology* (2005). In these he develops a potent critique of modern liberal philosophy and the viability of liberal democracy as a working form of government. This critique has proven especially influential in the thought of political philosopher Leo Strauss and has recently been taken up for discussion by those such as Agamben, Hardt, Negri and others.

holds great relevance. What is needed is only some minor tweaking. In the place of Metz's neo-scholastic paradigm, we might think in terms of the "Imperial Theology" that those such as Jim Wallis have identified as the source of President George W. Bush's "Bad Religion" (2003, 2005). In the place of Metz's transcendental-idealist paradigm, we might examine the limitations of postmodern deconstructive theology, specifically with regard to its ineffectual political philosophy (see Surin, who argues that postmodern deconstructive philosophies are a virtual non-starter with regard to a meaningful emancipatory political project; see also Eagleton). And in the place of Metz's post-Idealist paradigm, I will suggest an alternative theology of Empire that draws primarily from the sweeping, prophetic collaborative work of Negri and Hardt.

[8] Allow me one final word by way of introduction and orientation. One way that this paper can be read and understood is as an attempt at a dialectical reversal of Schmitt's political theology. While Schmitt's analysis proceeds from the theological to its secular actualization in contemporary politics and legal theory, I am proposing that we interrogate how the new global order of Empire, as suggested by Negri and Hardt, gives rise to a new form of political theology, one that will help us to better understand and direct the forces of globalization. Like Metz, I too think this requires nothing less than a paradigm shift, not only to political theology, but also for all those on the increasingly fractured left committed to radical democracy – what is required is a shift from the minor resistance associated with the left's current commitment to identity politics to a new political ontology, or, in the language of Alain Badiou, a shift from the micropolitics of difference to a "metapolitics" of truth. This is the great achievement of Hardt and Negri. Not that they have realized this goal, but they have at least forced those on the left to begin the task of rethinking the conceptual bases for democracy itself.

[9] Of course, it is a tricky business granting someone like Schmitt such privilege in one's analysis. The facts of Schmitt's strident anti-Semitism and unambiguous Nazi commitments are well known. Due to the importance of Schmitt's legal defense of the emergency powers assumed by the Nazi state, he was known as the "crown jurist" of the Third Reich. He was a committed and unrepentant advocate of the Nazi regime. Throughout his life, he displayed a violent distaste for liberal society. Indeed, as noted by Alan Wolfe in a recent article from *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, these facts make "the left's continuing fascination with him difficult to comprehend."

[10] Nevertheless, Schmitt's conception of the political as "the most intense and extreme antagonism" has proven to be enormously influential for many of those on the left who are increasingly concerned about the apparent triumph of global capital and the accompanying crisis of liberal democracy. When Schmitt suggests, as summarized by Mark Lilla, that "The ultimate problem with liberalism . . . is that it fears decisions more than it fears enemies" (60), this critique rings true with the results of recent national elections, both within the U.S. and abroad. (Who can forget the image of John Kerry as a flip-flopper, the commercial catching him in the Senate, saying "I voted for the \$87 million, before I voted against it," or the footage of him windsurfing, blown this way and that depending on the winds of public opinion. The reason these images were so damaging was because they captured something fundamental about the public's frustration with liberalism. They worked because at least on some level they were true.)

[11] If Schmitt has proven to be influential for those on the left who are rethinking the nature of the political after the collapse of communism, then he has proven to be equally discerning about the strategies and tactics by which contemporary political battles will be waged, specifically by those on the right. As Wolfe writes:

There are, I venture to say, no seminars on Schmitt taking place anywhere in the Republican Party and, even if any important conservative political activists have heard of Schmitt, which is unlikely, they would surely distance themselves from his totalitarian sympathies. Still, Schmitt's way of thinking about politics pervades the contemporary zeitgeist in which Republican conservatism has flourished, often in ways so prescient as to be eerie. In particular, his analysis helps explain the ways in which conservatives attack liberals and liberals, often reluctantly, defend themselves.

[12] One of the ironies of the contemporary fascination with Schmitt, therefore, is that he is influential on the left in spite of himself and his personal proclivity for various forms of totalitarianism, and he is absorbed though seldom read by those on the right as the exemplary political philosopher of *realpolitik*. Put otherwise, he is valued as political philosopher for his descriptive analysis of the actual nature of the political, but whether this descriptive analysis is therefore to be taken as a prescriptive manual for getting one's way is where those on the left and right of the political spectrum typically part company. The problem, however, is that his analysis of the translation from theology to its actualization in secular politics treats this transformation as if it is an already accomplished and irreversible fact. As Schmitt's 1923 book *Roman Catholicism and Political Form* (1996b) reveals, beneath the surface of Schmitt's political realism lies an idealized notion of the once unified Christian world that has since been lost. It is for this reason that Lilla labels Schmitt as a "reckless mind," because in drawing the limitation of liberalism, Schmitt falls prey to what Lilla calls "the politics of theological despair" (76). By despair, Lilla means that there is a deep and dangerous nostalgia that pervades Schmitt's work, which then provides sanction for the hard-edged cynicism and calculation that is falsely equated with today's so-called political realism. Therefore, by calling for this dialectical reversal of Schmitt, I am not advocating a return to some pure, less politically contentious and more religious past. On the contrary, I am suggesting a broadening or radicalization of our understanding of the very concept of democracy itself such that the theological actualization in secular politics is not without its own theological significance and thus still open to the most strident theological scrutiny.

A Post-Secular Democracy

[13] In order to think through the crisis of liberal democracy, the very meaning of secularism, specifically its religious history and contemporary political ramifications, must be rethought. Secularization is too often associated with the anti-religious sentiment that characterized much of the modern mind, when in fact secularity is not (at least not necessarily) opposed to religion. It is important, therefore, to distinguish between what can be called the ideology of secularism and the processes of secularization. As pointed out by Peter Berger, the former has tied itself too exclusively to a rather simplistic reading of the sociological theory of secularization which thinks that the more modern we become, the less religious we would become. Secularization, on the other hand, is best understood as the socio-political consequence of a specific religious history – namely, the post-Reformation history of the Christian west. This includes not only the series of religious wars that ended with the diplomatic Peace of Westphalia (1648), but also the emerging political philosophy from this period that found its classic American expression in James Madison's "Memorial and Remonstrance." In this text, which was written to oppose a proposed bill that would have established Christian education in the commonwealth of Virginia, Madison identifies this minimal form of religious establishment as a "dangerous abuse of power." The obvious reason for Madison's opposition was the conflict he saw between the establishment of religion and the freedom of religion that was a prerequisite for a democratic society. As Madison wrote, "The same authority which can establish Christianity, in exclusion of all other Religions, may establish with the same ease

any particular sect of Christians, in exclusion of all other Sects.” Less obvious is the lesson Madison drew from history and which the subsequent history of the United States seems to have confirmed. Again, in Madison’s words:

Because experience witnesseth that ecclesiastical establishments, instead of maintaining the purity and efficacy of Religion, have had the contrary operation. During almost fifteen centuries has the legal establishment of Christianity been on trial. What have been its fruits? More or less in all places, pride and indolence in the Clergy, ignorance and servility in the laity, in both, superstition, bigotry and persecution.

[14] This would become the basis for the strictly “voluntary” nature of American religion. The irony, as those observers of the United States from at least Tocqueville to the present have maintained, is that this peculiar form of the positive political value of secularization has apparently contributed to a certain religious vitality and dynamism, and further, has made possible a radical and unrestrained form of theological inquiry that is untethered from ecclesiastical control. Accordingly, secularization has much more to do with religious pluralism than it does with some kind of rejection or turning away from religion. In other words, the challenge of secularization is not with religious decline but with religious multiplicity. This is a point made years ago by Peter Berger in his own reconsideration of the secularization theory. As Berger noted, perhaps “pluralization theory” would be a more apt description of the status of religion in the modern world, if only because it does not confuse the processes of modernization with a lessening of religious intensity or devotion (37).

[15] This distinction between the ideology of secularism and the processes of secularization raises another matter in need of clarification: the connection between, or more precisely, the conflation of, globalization as a political, economic, and cultural reality and global democracy as a desired end. The fact that the world is increasingly interconnected and interdependent seems so obvious that it has become cliché, but its relation and contribution to the spread of global democracy is an open and contested question. Like the conflation of the modern processes of secularization with the ideology of secularism, there has been a conflation of globalization with democracy that has contributed to an uncritical acceptance of the globalized free market economy as the necessary path to peace and prosperity. Meanwhile, a true commitment to radical democracy threatens to undo the always tenuous global economic (if not political and/or cultural) alliance that is constituted by and perpetuates the very inequalities and consequent disharmony it claims to alleviate. In other words, far from being a force for democracy, the economics and ideology of globalization can just as easily be seen as an anti-democratic force as it increasingly shifts sovereignty from the nation-state to the multi-national or trans-national corporation, with the result that political accountability is obscured and rendered inconsequential by its utter lack of transparency. But at the same time, while anti-democratic, globalization also establishes the conditions for a new form of radical democracy, unhinged from state control and national interests. As the urgent political crisis of our time, it also presents a fundamental challenge to contemporary theology: How does this displacement of sovereignty lead to an alternative form of theology that does not speak from a place of privilege or authority, but instead accepts its status as one conversation partner among many?

[16] Turning to Hardt and Negri’s political philosophy of globalization – namely, that the shift from the modern to the postmodern parallels the shift from the imperialistic age of the sovereign nation-state to the post-national age of Empire – an alternative theology of Empire is one that moves beyond the (neo-)conservative apologetics for American exceptionalism and Christian triumphalism, on the one hand, and the reactionary liberal strategy of political opposition and theological deconstruction, on the other. The former, though nominally committed to a hard political realism,

has proven itself either to be hopelessly naïve or desperately cynical by remaining dogmatically wed to its utopic visions in spite of the hard lessons of history, both past and present. Further, its uncritical imperial theology provides both sanction and rationale for American hegemony. The latter – the reactionary, liberal strategy of opposition and deconstruction – though concerned with the long-term consequences of American hegemony and the ideology that undergirds the doctrine of military preemption, has failed to acknowledge how its own commitments to, and the current global tendency towards, indeterminacy, hybridity, and mobility reflect their own position of privilege on the global stage. As Hardt and Negri point out, while these commitments mean liberation for some, they spell oppression, isolation, and alienation for others. As such, they see this deconstructive variant of postmodern discourse as the twin symptom or shadow side of the passage to Empire along with the various forms of fundamentalism that it so vehemently opposes.

[17] It is one thing to deconstruct fundamentalism and to oppose the religious militancy it so often inspires, but it is quite another to develop an alternative political ontology. This is why Hardt and Negri argue that even though the multitude is an already existing subject as the force of social production, the multitude still needs to be formed into a political body. In other words, “the multitude needs a political project to bring it into existence” (2005: 212). Likewise, along with this political project, the multitude stands ready for an alternative theology that is able to generate and sustain a meaningful piety. It is towards that end that the earlier distinction made between secularization and secularism is so important. Secularization not only protects the inalienable right of individual conscience, but as Gianni Vattimo suggests, it is also our way of living the postmodern return of religion in the most democratic fashion. Not an oppositional or anti-religious secularization, but secularization as a political commitment that grows out of the realities of living in a multi-religious world.

[18] This is also where Hardt and Negri’s distinction between the people and the multitude is key. That is to say, as the religious history of secularization leads to the political disestablishment of religion, and thus provides the conditions for a plurivocal democracy, so too might the old form of political philosophy that conceptualizes democracy in terms of the people as sovereign give way to the multitude. Whereas “the people is one, the multitude remains plural” (Hardt and Negri 2005: 99). Returning to the dialectical reversal of Schmitt I proposed earlier, his argument is that contemporary political and legal theory is the secular actualization of traditional theological concepts. The root concept is the theological notion of a sovereign and transcendent God in whom power and authority rested. For modern political theory, this notion of sovereignty gets refashioned from the transcendent to the immanent realm, from God to the people, and thus the concept of popular sovereignty is born and becomes the conceptual basis upon which liberal democracy rests. However, what happens when the very concept of the people reveals itself as betraying a form of absolutism? As the conceptual basis for democracy is being rethought, this has profound significance for theology as it informs the contemporary understanding of authority. Mirroring the modern processes of secularization, what we are now in a position to see is how the theological voice suffers from its own disestablishment and displacement. This is a reversal of Schmitt’s analysis because whereas for him, he follows the logic from theology to politics, here we have the political driving and reforming the theological. Now, if we accept Hardt and Negri when they write that “The challenge of the multitude is the challenge of democracy,” and if the multitude, though already an emerging historical subject, still requires a political project to bring it into existence, then it is a specifically disestablished and thus secularized theology that provides the requisite theological supplement to help complete this conceptual revolution in political ontology. It is this political and theological project that remains the unfinished business of secularization, and still the unclaimed legacy of modernity.

[19] It is towards this end that several progressive, liberal-minded Christian organizations have formed and begun to win a hearing. Borrowing from the playbook of the political ascendancy of the religious right, groups such as the Sojourners and the more recently formed Christian Alliance for Progress have organized themselves on the grassroots level trying to reclaim the public relevance of Christianity beyond the narrowly defined culture values so prominent within conservative evangelical circles. *Sojourners* identifies itself as a progressive Christian magazine of faith, politics, and culture. At times it reads like messages from the lone outpost of the old, liberal, and socially active variant of American Protestantism. Not surprisingly, it has taken strong stands against the post-9/11 militarization of America, and more specifically, the almost Manichean moral vision of President Bush that has driven his self-proclaimed “war on terror.” In the fall 2003 issue, editor Jim Wallis’ cover story was on “George W. Bush’s theology of empire,” in which Wallis not only faults Bush for his counterproductive and unjust doctrine of preemption, but also for his “bad theology.” As Wallis writes, “America’s foreign policy is more than pre-emptive, it is theologically presumptuous; not only unilateral, but dangerously messianic; not just arrogant, but bordering on the idolatrous and blasphemous.”

[20] What makes this a case of not only bad theology, but even more, “dangerous religion,” as the article asserts, is its ideological sanctioning of an American empire. This is the overtly aggressive foreign policy charted by the “neoconservative” policy advisers to Bush even before he came into office in the 1997 foreign policy statement, “The Project for the New American Century.” In this document, the prospect of peace was predicated on “unquestioned U.S. military pre-eminence.” This long-term strategic vision called on the U.S. to “accept responsibility for America’s unique role in preserving and extending an international order friendly to our security, our prosperity, and our principles.” Wallis’ response, “That, indeed, is empire,” with the clear implication that as such, it must be resisted.

[21] In response to Wallis’ central claim that the U.S. military’s taking on the responsibility for preserving and extending a friendly international order effectively constitutes an empire, he is both right and wrong. It is true, as critics such as Tariq Ali in his *The Clash of Fundamentalisms* have argued, that America has many of the traditional characteristics of an imperial power, most notably in the fact that it has a military base on every continent, and at least by Ali’s count, a military presence in 120 out of the 189 member states of the United Nations. More damaging, perhaps, is the perception that it operates by a double-standard, turning a blind-eye to its allies, whether it be Israel, Saudi Arabia, or Pakistan, and singling out unfriendly regimes such as Iraq, Iran, and North Korea for various human rights violations. For Ali, this follows the age-old rule of empires in the fact that they always act out of their own self-interests by championing ideals of equality and justice while exploiting the fabric of power. This fundamental hypocrisy intrinsic to imperialism breeds resentment and hostility, and eventually leads to what Chalmers Johnson terms “blowback” in the form of terrorism. It is also why Ali argues in a characteristically provocative style that American imperialism is the most dangerous form of fundamentalism today because it is the “mother of all fundamentalisms” (12).

[22] One might argue that Ali needs a better understanding of the historical rise of religious fundamentalism, or that his neo-Marxist critique of the current political economy needs to be supplemented or corrected by a more nuanced theory of religion. However, even more fundamental to both his and Wallis’ respective critiques is the operative definition of empire out of which they are working. For both, empire is inseparable from imperialism, and therefore, when Ali speaks of “American imperialism,” and Wallis of Bush’s “theology of empire,” they rightly critique the dangers of American hegemony and arrogance, but *wrongly locate its source within the spirit of nationalism*. The

problem with this notion of empire as imperialism, as Hardt and Negri explain, is that it is based on an antiquated ontology of sovereignty in which the nation-state stands as the autonomous subject. It operates by an exclusively linear logic of cause-and-effect and will-to-mastery. It grants to the ideologues on the right their first premise, namely, that the United States, as the lone super-power, is truly the master of its fate, that world events are subject to its control, and that overwhelming force will always have the power to squelch resistance, even that of asymmetrical warfare. Put simply, it belongs to the past paradigm of modern political economy. To borrow from Hardt and Negri:

[Such a view] cannot account for the real novelty of the historical processes we are witnessing today. In this regard these theories can and do become harmful, because they do not recognize the accelerated rhythm, the violence, and the necessity with which the new imperial paradigm operates. *What they do not understand is that imperial sovereignty marks a paradigm shift* (2001: 8; emphasis in the original).

A new political order of globalization represents a paradigm shift that moves from the understanding of empire as an extension of nationalism, to Empire as a post-colonial, even post-imperialistic, concept and form of political intervention. This is a supra-national global order in which the United States indeed occupies a privileged position, but it “*does not, and indeed no nation-state can today, form the center of an imperialist project*” (Hardt and Negri 2001: xiv; emphasis in the original). Such is the challenge that Hardt and Negri pose to contemporary political theory, a challenge that is simultaneously a reactivation of Marx’s ever-evolving critique of capitalism and a call for greater conceptual precision and clarity.

[23] This concept of Empire is also explicitly a challenge to what Hardt and Negri label as the “conspiracy theory of globalization,” which both Ali and Wallis subscribe to in certain degrees by attributing the present world order to “a single power and a single center of rationality *transcendent* to global forces, guiding the various phases of historical development according to its conscious and allseeing plan” (2001: 3). Therefore, in accordance with this new concept of Empire, the more damning critique of American foreign policy in general, and Bush’s moral leadership in particular, is that they are in service to, if not pawns of, the new supra-national global order. In other words, American treasure and lives are spoiled on feeding a system that already is, and that will continue to be, its own undoing. This is the great irony and paradox that we must now face, the fact that “Empire is born and shows itself as crisis,” and that “the becoming of Empire is actually realized on the basis of the same conditions that characterize its decadence and decline” (2001: 20).

[24] Long before Hardt and Negri, sociologist of religion, Robert Bellah, detected a similar critical point of transition with regard to both relations between nations and between religion and politics. For instance, in the conclusion to his article, “Civil Religion in America,” he speaks of a “third time of trial” that Americans then faced:

The first time of trial had to do with the question of independence, whether we should or could run our own affairs in our own way. The second time of trial was over the issue of slavery, which in turn was only the most salient aspect of the more general problem of the full institutionalization of democracy within our country . . . We have been overtaken by a third great problem which has led to a third great crisis in the midst of which we stand. This is the problem of responsible action in a revolutionary world, a world seeking to attain many of the things, material and spiritual, that we have already attained.

With the first two times of trial, the major symbols and themes of American civil religion emerged, such as the ideals of religious liberty and equality. The third, however, has less to do with the United

States and its own national sovereignty, than with “the attainment of some kind of viable and coherent world order,” and “the emergence of a genuine trans-national sovereignty.” A true appreciation of this moment of crisis and transition would result not in the exportation of specifically American values, or the establishment or extension of American hegemony, but rather, in Bellah’s estimation, “it would result in American civil religion becoming simply one part of a new civil religion in the world.”

[25] To put Hardt and Negri together with Bellah, this realization of the current world order as a post-imperialistic Empire, and the recognition of the emergence of trans-national sovereignty, allows for a post-national theology of Empire that is not driven by self-interests and not predicated on military prowess, and more positively, that makes possible new forms of trans-national solidarity and a more potent agonistic political strategy. In Bellah’s mind this was the unfinished business of democracy. As we come to terms with the new paradigm of political theology in a post-secular age, we might add that it also remains the unfinished business of secularization.

Conclusion

[26] The question that remains is why this vision of a post-secular democracy is more viable than Schmitt’s eventual rejection of democracy that resulted from his potent analysis of the failures of liberalism? Put otherwise, is it really possible to move beyond the politics of theological despair? This paper is intended to provide an affirming answer to that question so long as our understanding of the contours of the future is not driven by a nostalgia for a past unity that never was, whether in the form of unity of belief under the sovereignty of a transcendent and unknowable God, or in accordance with the modern ideology of secularism that prematurely silenced the religious in favor of its own faith in secular reason. For the first time, perhaps, as the state of exception has increasingly become the norm of government in a globalized world, we are in a position to commit ourselves to a truly radical form of democracy – a genuine form of democracy by which even the modern political concept of sovereignty as expressed through the will of the people might give way to the revolutionary embrace of the multitude. This is a vision of the future that is imbued with hope rather than cynicism, promise rather than despair.

[27] Set within the political context of the state of exception and with the contemporary turn to the political, the question that is raised is not whether and how it is possible to return to the state of law, because, as Agamben rightly points out, “at issue now are the very concepts of ‘state’ and ‘law’” (87). Instead, the question is whether and how a true and thoroughgoing commitment to democracy can be restored from its current crisis and can have its proper political status restored. While in generations past critics such as Carl Schmitt doubted this project of recovery and restoration as a viable possibility, seeing the crisis of liberal democracy as so dire, so far-ranging, and so entrenched in bourgeois, consumer culture that our future required a wholesale rejection of modern liberalism and all it implied, including that of democracy itself. He would eventually find this alternative by way of his political theology that linked the transcendence of God together with the political concept of sovereignty, and thus, he effectively curtailed the modern democratic commitment to the will of the people by arguing for a return to the inscrutable will of a mysterious God. While agreeing with Schmitt’s basic diagnosis of the limitations, if not crisis, of liberal democracy, what this paper has tried to demonstrate is that the solution he offers is both too nostalgic and too severe, which is not to say that it is too radical. For in the place of Schmitt’s political theology that disdains democracy for the limitations and failures of modern liberalism, this paper has instead made the argument for a more radical commitment to a genuine and thoroughgoing democracy, a commitment that goes beyond the modern liberal concept of popular sovereignty by appealing to the disparate and sometimes unruly voices of the multitude.

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