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Review  
Article

# TWO DIFFERENT DISCOURSES: POLITICAL THEOLOGY AND POLITICAL RELIGION IN THE CONTEXT OF SECULARISATION

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## Keywords

*Political theology,  
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Secularisation,  
Divinity,  
Power*

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## Abstract

*In the current context, religion has become a central subject for many philosophers and political scientists as a result of the secularisation phenomenon developed in the twentieth century. Although the theorists have divided opinions on the implications of post-modernism, there is a commonly accepted position on a form of justification for the state through religion. The article articulates the fact that all the political concepts are secularised theological concepts. The relationship between religion and politics – divinity and power – will allow the reconstruction of the theological-political construct. There is an ambiguity when referring to this subject, confusing political theology with political religion. From this reasoning, the present article tries to identify the differences between political theology and political religion, discourses debated in European political and social thinking. This approach is relevant because the political role of religion continues to develop increasingly complex discourses, but, at the same time, with a direct impact on the concept of power inside the state.*

Based on the secularisation phenomenon, many scholars and theorists analysed the development of the political as a concept related to religion and its incidence. To be noted that, from a sociological point of view, secularisation has been seen as a process of emancipation towards the Church, becoming a rationalisation effect, as Weber argues (Sirroneau, 1982). Although intellectuals are divided on the implications of post-modernism, there is a form of justification for the state through religion. Here it is fundamental to overcome the restrictive definition, according to which religion is considered to belong exclusively to an intimate – private space. For sure that man, as the centre of creation, has put religion at the basis of his natural and supernatural knowledge, making religious sentiment indispensable throughout the history of mankind. Although religion can be a fiction, the presence of divinity is not fictitious for the religious person. It can be said that in a society, religion is absolutely necessary, being in the service of political power. By using it, the political power exercised its control over the population, generating social order and prosperity (Bernhard&Suber, 2005). This work attempts to highlight the relationship between religion and politics, beyond the traditional experience associated with the Church-State relationship, by joining two relevant concepts for the twentieth century, political theology and political religion.

To begin with, it is relevant to define the term *political* as it is the central element that helps to deepen the above-mentioned notions. Besides, the primary attempt that led to the comparison of political theology with political religion has started with the process of reconstructing the political in the context of secularisation. Accordingly, the political is the way in which power is constituted inside the state, whether it is based on a complex of economic, political or religious relations. A more comprehensive definition would be that “the political is an essence, meaning that it is a fundamental, vital and permanent category of man’s existence in society, in the sense that man is already a social being by nature (...) This also says that that man is immediately a political being, as he is immediately an economic or religious being, without talking about a chronological precedence or a logical superiority of one of these activities over the other” (Freund, 1965).

The present paper asserts that the political is one of the humanity’s essences. This means that it can be found in all societies, from all periods, from archaic populations to modern nations. It is not to be understood that, speaking of the origin of the state, it is also implicitly mentioned the origin of political. Moreover, modern political philosophy makes no distinction between state-owned societies and stateless societies. The political expresses their way

of organisation, in the sense of maintaining peace or increasing prosperity. Whether it is the obedience of society manifested through coercive power, or the feeling of absolute freedom, the presence of political in society cannot be denied.

Therefore, the question that arises is “what role does religion play in reconstructing the political within the secularisation scenario?”. In the context of secularisation, amid a scenario of reconfiguring the political, religion seems to play an important role. There was an initiative to uproot the authority of any religious reminiscences in order to form a secular, modern state. Having a retrospective look in history, achieving this transformation goal produces a reaction, materialised in a counter-revolutionary paradigm. In the same vein, the risk of initiating a para-politic (meaning a de-politicisation of political) leads to a reaction of an ultra-politicisation, initiated by the conservative jurist Carl Schmitt. Through the gradual usurpation of the theological functions of divinity, the liberal juridical-political system diverts the traditional sense of sovereignty, reducing everything to the presence of a political class. But, this offers the possibility to achieve a political theology. In the context of modernity, political concepts are secular reformulations of theological ones, so that political becomes a theology structured according to its model and its resemblance.

As a result, the discourse of rebuilding the political by relating it to religion is an approach that offers a controversial political theology, sometimes understood as a political religion by some scholars. Following the analysis, it has been observed that either confusion or debate is being created on political theology and political religion. Therefore, this article will provide a comparative approach to the two concepts, aiming at a conceptual delimitation necessary for the public and academic sphere.

However, “why, in order to substantiate an authority, the religious is needed?”. As a response, Carl Schmitt’s famous statement can be invoked, saying that “all the significant concepts of the state’s modern theory are secularised theological concepts” (Schmitt, 2004). Often, in post-modern approaches, the religious element is ignored or removed not only because of the scientific and technological progress, but also because of an aggressive secularism based on instrumental rationality that reduces moral and political life to (subjective) utilitarian computation. In an Occidental society that has forgotten its historical and religious endowments, political authority and the Church are trying to bring intellect and faith into a new productive synthesis. The constant pursue for the common good, proposed by political systems is not sufficient, but an individual *revelatio* is needed, that ultimately legitimises political authority. Throughout this period, the post-secular model of legitimating the political is

achieved only partially, through dialogue and consensus, not through the above-mentioned individual revelation.

The term “political religion” was attributed to those ideologies with a strong cultural and political luggage that meet certain social requirements and psychological functions corresponding to religions. In the existing scientific literature, political religion is assimilated by extremist ideologies, where power is equivalent to a state religion, with a manicheist vision, totalitarian aspirations and theatrical ritualisation of public events (Umland, 2010). The concept of political religions was developed by Eric Voegelin in his book *Die politischen religionen*. For him, ideologies such as communism, fascism, and national-socialism are the product of the secularisation process, where the nations are trying to achieve political cohesion through the ideology of the masses (race, economy, or blood). The way to achieve politics is related to other governing systems, adding an aspect of sacralisation of institutions, a space traditionally considered as belonging to the private, religious sphere (Gentile, 2006). The elements that converge to the idea that totalitarian regimes were cultural models with a quasi-religious dimension, express that divinity is sought and found in the discrete substance of the state, this being related to the myth of salvation (Maier, 2007).

At the moment, political religion does not refer exclusively to totalitarian regimes, but it is framed in the nationalist trend, or in the theocratic fundamentalism. In this way, a redefinition of the relationship between religion and politics, the secular the sacred was attempted, offering a dual perspective: on the one hand, a “politicisation of religion”, and on the other hand, a “religisation of politics” (Gentile, 2005). Without distinction, political religion manifests its influence in the Church-State relation.

On the other hand, the notion of political theology is not a recent one, but it has been encountered in some forms since Antiquity. The term “theology” originally designated the speaking with divinities (*deum loqui*), but also knowing deity and all that is related to it. *Θεολογία* has been served to define a political theory problem. For Plato, the issue of theology was intrinsically linked to political theory, describing the relationship between community and authority. This concept was perceived as an extension of pre-modern understanding that people have known the world either by divine revelation or by a rational act of interpretation, where the world is, nevertheless, the creation of God; from a philosophical point of view, there is no theology without political implications. Even for a theology that pretends to be apolitical, some political implications could be found. Proudhon notes that theology can always be found in political, and this statement is later reiterated by his opponent, Donoso

Cortés (Taubes, 1955). Political theology explores the implications of theology in political activity, where religious concepts have been secularised and transposed as key political elements.

Regarded from another point of view, theology is perceived as a transcendental relation, developed from divine will to man. Here it is needed the man’s participation on the relationship with God, implicitly transfiguring the self. Thus, seen from this perspective, theology is less a philosophical reflection, and more a transfiguration event. The concept of political theology is introduced in literature by the German Catholic jurist Carl Schmitt, an author who substantially contributes to the resurgence of interest in this theme, transposing it into the centre of political philosophy. For Carl Schmitt, political theology is a construction that is born by recognising the historical character of divine revelation. The point of reference for the critique of political theology is secularism, meaning the autonomy of the liberal secular field from religious interests and practices. Secularism is closely linked to the development of modern liberalism, as liberalism involves an individual division of the public-private sphere. Here, religion is more attributed to the private sphere, but it never disappears from the modern world. The ideology of secularism is criticised not only by traditionalists, but also by post-modernists or post-secularists (Sigurdson, 2010).

Beyond the descriptive framework that followed the definition of concepts, the following section proposes a comparative analysis of political religion and political theology, a discussion nourished by the many debates of the twentieth century. This comparison begins with the assumption that theology is theoretical, while religion is practical (Shorten, 2010). Political religion is related to the internal component of political because it addresses the masses and involves their conversion into the new decisional system. In this scenario, the political develops an affective component. On the other hand, political theology does not relate to the *affectio humanis*, but to the *ratio humanis*, which creates the premises of a discourse of justification the political by reference to divinity. This element of rationality within the individual brings a dehumanised perspective on political, in its broadly revealed sense. Political theology is therefore a systematisation of God-related authority. This way of thinking, *in extenso*, requires political authority to be attributed to the sovereign, as the religious authority is attributed to God.

Each author who addresses this subject questions the thesis of secularisation and how religion is connected in social reality. The historical movement is understood by Schmitt as “the neutralisation and de-politicisation of the state” (Tofan, 2011). On the one hand, neutrality involves the replacement of conflict and choice with peace and agreement; in this

way, the spiritual nature no longer fights for salvation, but is governed by the economy. On the other hand, de-politicisation creates division, where the state comes to function after impersonal laws. Because of the scenario of secularisation, it allows the realisation of a political theology, the state emerging from neutrality. Schmitt says that the example of the Catholic Church is most relevant to the development of a *complexio oppositorum* with a dogmatic-political function, arguing that it excels in the way of political representation, transposed into the concept of authority (Schmitt, 1996). The Pope's figure is the image of the Son, and in his mission, man could not have reached salvation unless he had fallen.

If a confessional assignment of the two concepts would be possible, political theology would strictly refer to Judeo-Christian tradition, while the political religion settles to all religious confessions. Following, it is important to spot the historical aspects of the two constructs. From this point of view, religion is considered to exist much earlier in comparison with theology. Theology discusses religions as explicit phenomena and comes across the ancient Greek branch, where it was considered a discourse about the deities. On the other hand, religion, a term derived from Latin, refers to faith or trust in something (Shorten, 2010). Religious behaviour is found in all stages of the history of mankind, with diverse and often contradictory manifestations. By default, the political religion is fragmented and adaptable to any form of faith; while political theology was developed a few centuries before Christ, having a predominantly unitary discourse.

Pursuing the analysis of the two concepts, it is important how each of the two includes or excludes the other. From the point of view of political religion, it excludes the possibility of a political theology because faith is the central element that prevails, undermining the element of individual or collective rationality. On the other hand, political theology may include a certain political religion as religion can be assimilated to theology. So, the question that arises is "what is the religion's involvement in politics"? Can religion delineate its discourse from theology? There is no doubt that the discourses of the two result from a mutual recognition of the religion. Therefore, although the two differ, there are some important resemblances. Both talk about the political, but each one does it in a specific way. Political religion deepens religion; it has a theological discourse on politics. Political theology determines the political. This political is a rationalised affair that generates power, becoming a public and accessible domain. In this way, two models that differ in their approach get confused. Regarding the role of religion, Voegelin believes that it should not justify or determine politics, but to

provide the existential sense of community action (Voegelin, 2000).

## CONCLUSIONS

Although by the words, "Render to Caesar what are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21), Christ desacralises the political space, the power is maintained in unity with the world of God. The theological-political scenario is possible precisely because of the fact that both religion and politics resemble: they highlight the man who is referring to the same thing: to power. In fact, Christianity reveals love in the power of God, and political comprehend freedom in the power of the state. Although political religion and political theology differ when exposing their own architectural framework, both refer to a common corpus of ideas, the Judeo-Christian. It is worth mentioning that the theological-political discourse does not include the religious sentiment, otherwise an anachronistic subjectivism would be created. Religion and political are under a symphonic relation, where divinity is the centre of two concentric circles between which there is no subordination relationship, but rather they are situated in different plans. Political religion resembles a surrogate religion that sacrifices the state and attempts to legitimise the regime, while the individual is subordinated to the commander of power. Thus, there is a transfer of religious essence from divine to human, making political leaders to be perceived as secular gods (Shorten, 2010). Accordingly, political theology offers a theology with political consequences, where the sovereign can create something out of nothing: *creatio ex nihilo*, capacity attributed to an omnipotent God. Authority's decision-making capacity is a virtue that keeps a political society away from eschatology; meanwhile its power lies in the power of representation of the Church. Understanding the concept of political makes it possible to reaffirm religion in the secular context, moving from a simple communicative element to a mutual determination.

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