
How are we to make any sense of ‘political theology’ today in a world where the modern processes of secularization seem to be on the brink of eradicating any political hold that the ‘theological’ once had? For many within the field of theology, this reading of the current state of things only exacerbates the fear that the theological is losing its relevance entirely. It is much to the credit of Paul Kahn that he takes an opposing viewpoint, and argues, following closely the *Political Theology* (1922) of Carl Schmitt, that theology is as relevant to our political sphere as ever before.

Though the legacy of Schmitt’s work is certainly a controversial one to approach, owing to his unrepentant political affiliations with National Socialism in early twentieth century Germany, Kahn is careful to examine the content of Schmitt’s work over its context, while also taking seriously his flawed political associations; a move that has often characterized the reception of Schmitt’s work since the Second World War.

The major thesis that Kahn develops, in a number of nuanced shades, is that Schmitt’s notion of political theology is still very much applicable to our contemporary cultural landscape, perhaps as strongly as ever in a specifically American context. To deliver such a view, he seeks to articulate something of Schmitt’s analysis of sovereign power, given birth to through the sovereign’s ability to render decisions, and framed with a deeply theological lexicon. In essence, he asserts that ‘political violence has been and remains a form of sacrifice’ (p. 7). Also, among the many (albeit varied) ‘secularized theological concepts’ (p. 1) that Schmitt has become famous for, pointing us towards (for example, ‘revolution’ as ‘revelation’), is the sovereign’s relation to a ‘state of exception’ said to function analogously to the miraculous, yet as that which grounds the sovereign’s power and which springs from the sovereign’s ability to decide (‘sovereign is he who decides on the exception’ (p. 1), Schmitt once said).

Following Schmitt throughout, though careful to read him critically as well, Kahn addresses politics as a discourse that is based on the ‘irrational’ distinction between the ‘friend’ and the ‘enemy’, no matter how difficult this may be to sort out in reality. Further, despite the ideological and imaginary constructions which such a politics takes, there is little that can be done to stop such a popular conceptualization from ceasing to govern the American worldview any time soon. The sovereignty of a nation-state in fact depends upon the ideological constructions that such ‘easy’ contrasts can provide. Political theology is thus capable of taking political violence more seriously than liberal theories (such as John Rawls) ever could. This is due to the fact, Kahn stresses, that the state is not the secular arrangement that it purports to be’ (p. 18).

The reinvigorated analysis that Kahn advances consequently also helps us to see the unique role of ‘faith’ in America from a new perspective, since America, unlike its European counterparts, still exercises a great (though often undisclosed) dependency upon an almost invisible ‘sovereign’ power. In Kahn’s astute observation, political analysis in
America must learn to take its ‘theological’ elements more seriously than it has to date, in order to comprehend the complex interactions that constitute the unique ‘political theology’ interwoven in its heritage. From such a position, what strikes the reader as perhaps the most significant insight to be learned from this excellent theoretical and yet practical series of observations is that the real strength of Kahn’s book is that it serves as a potent counterforce to a certain liberal theoretical blindness to such forms of violence that are, more or less, an inherent and constitutive part of our western political order: its ‘theological’ inheritance.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of Kahn’s view on the relevance of political theology today—and therefore as that which causes this book to stand out among a large body of recent ‘political theological’ writing—is that it attempts to refocus what has become the most divisive political issue in American life: the gap that separates the rule of law from popular sovereignty, ‘that is, between law and self-government’ (p. 8). As he aptly puts it: ‘Indeed, I can summarize the inquiry of this book in a single question: what do we learn if we engage Schmitt’s argument from a perspective that substitutes the popular sovereign for his idea of the sovereign?’ (p. 9). By making this contrast the focus of his work, Kahn is able to point directly at a pressing juridical issue that goes without mention: in what ways does the Supreme Court function, through its ability to declare a law ‘unconstitutional’ and therefore establish laws contrary to the popular sovereignty of the people, as an ‘exceptional’ sovereign body? Such critical insight, it is here wagered, is capable of shedding wholly new light on the many contradictions that have sustained ‘American exceptionalism’ over more than two centuries (and in contrast with the European Union’s efforts to expel ‘political theology’, through its adherence to a form of ‘law without exception’, something many Americans still balk at repeatedly).

Here and throughout the book, Kahn performs what he refers to as a ‘phenomenology of the political’, which is political theology, or that which reveals the ‘political formation of the experience of the sacred’ or the ‘social imaginary’ of the political (p. 23). The four short chapters that comprise this slender volume are accordingly all mirrored on Schmitt’s chapters in his *Political Theology*, providing a rich commentary that is also interspersed with historical and contemporary examples drawn from legal and political realms—both American and international—that illustrate the relevance of Schmittian political theology for today.

In the first chapter, an elaborated definition of sovereignty is spelled out, based on its relationship to exceptionalism and its ability to act decisively. Kahn presents us with a refreshing revisiting of what has become perhaps our greatest political tension: ‘how to do justice while violating just norms’ (p. 35), that is, framing the relationship of justice and love as one involving equity, especially when considering something like the sovereign’s ability to pardon the guilty.

The second chapter attempts to tackle the difficult terrain of competing juridical hermeneutics, that is, a look at what act (and not just theoretical conceptualization) fills the gap between a founding legal form (such as the US Constitution) and actual