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# The Blood of the Martyrs: Erik Peterson's Theology of Martyrdom and Carl Schmitt's Political Theology of Sovereignty

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**Abstract:** There is a growing literature on the theological roots of Schmitt's theory, however, such interpretations depart from the same position as Schmitt: from the political into the theological. In this quarrel between politics and theology, there is a less known contender, the theologian Erik Peterson, who developed a theological critique of Schmitt and shows the impossibility of a Christian political theology. In *Political Theology II* (1970), Schmitt criticizes the apolitical nature of Peterson's theology, but he ignores Peterson's theology of martyrdom. This paper recovers the centrality of martyrdom in Peterson's theology and argues that the martyr represents a counter model to Schmitt's sovereign. For Peterson, martyrdom is not apolitical act, but a public claim in which the martyrs testify in the public sphere that the highest human good is not political but eschatological. By recovering this eschatological dimension, Peterson shows the limits of Schmitt's interpretation of the political.

Carl Schmitt is one of the most controversial political theorists of the twentieth century, and his interpretation of political theology continues to be a matter of scholarly debate. Recently, the attention in the secondary literature has shifted from Schmitt's critique of liberalism and his legal theory to the theological roots of his political thought. Since the publication of his post-World War II personal diaries, the *Glossarium*, in 1991, and the subsequent re-examination of his early works, his self-image as "political theologian" or "theologian of jurisprudence"<sup>1</sup> has been disseminated by the scholarship to the point that Schmitt's odd relationship with Christianity can no longer

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<sup>1</sup>Carl Schmitt, *Glossarium: Aufzeichnungen aus den Jahren 1947 bis 1958* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2015), 3.10.47; 18.

be ignored.<sup>2</sup> While recent literature is paying more attention to the theological roots of Schmitt's political theory, those "theological interpretations"<sup>3</sup> tend to depart from the same position as Schmitt, from the political into the theological. However, there is considerable tension between Schmitt's political theology and Christian revelation that cannot be answered by pointing out the theological foundation of his political theory but must instead be found in a theological critique of Schmitt's theory.

In this long quarrel between politics and theology, there is a less-known contender, the theologian Erik Peterson, who articulated a theological response to Schmitt's political theology. While there are some relevant works on Schmitt and Peterson's relationship,<sup>4</sup> these naturally focus more on Peterson's case for the "theological impossibility of all political theology,"<sup>5</sup> which received a late reply from Schmitt in his *Political Theology II* (1970). Although Schmitt in this work challenges significant points of Peterson's theology and calls it apolitical, he ignores substantial aspects of Peterson's

<sup>2</sup>Mark Lilla, *The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals and Politics* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001), 67.

<sup>3</sup>Meier, for instance, proposes a re-evaluation of all Schmitt's political theory by considering how his idea of political theology presupposes revelation and subordinates politics to it. However, Meier argues that Schmitt behaves less like a Catholic and more "like a Protestant" (Heinrich Meier, *The Lesson of Carl Schmitt: Four Chapters on the Distinction between Political Theology and Political Philosophy*, expanded ed. [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011], 11). Contrary to this interpretation, Storey portrays Schmitt as a Catholic thinker by focusing on his early works (Jenna Silber Storey, "Devil's Advocate: Politics and Morality in the Work of Carl Schmitt" [PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2010], 17). However, considering his later works, especially Schmitt's *Political Theology II* (1970), it is possible to identify gnostic elements in his thought (Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008], 360n47). Another interpretation is provided by Storme, who argues that, despite Schmitt's earlier Catholicism, his Nazi and post-World War II writings are embedded in a political-theological Marcionism, in which the Mosaic God is opposed to Jesus, the Christ (Tristan Storme, *Carl Schmitt et le marcionisme: L'impossibilité théologico-politique d'un œcuménisme judéo-chrétien?* [Paris: Éditions du CERF, 2008], 85, 154, 229). Herrero, on the other hand, minimizes the gnostic affinity and characterizes Schmitt as a "mystic of order," an instrument of God's will, by exploring the shared absoluteness between the political and the theological (Montserrat Herrero, *The Political Discourse of Carl Schmitt: A Mystic of Order* [London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2015], 181).

<sup>4</sup>See Michael Hollerich, "Catholic Anti-liberalism in Weimar: Political Theology and Its Critics," in *The Weimar Moment: Liberalism, Political Theology, and Law*, ed. Leonard V. Kaplan and Rudy Koshar (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012); György Geréby, "Political Theology versus Theological Politics: Erik Peterson and Carl Schmitt," *New German Critique* 35, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 7–33.

<sup>5</sup>Erik Peterson, "Monotheism as a Political Problem: A Contribution to the History of Political Theology in the Roman Empire," in *Theological Tractates* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 233n168.

theology and isolates “Monotheism as a Political Problem” (1935) from the rest of Peterson’s theological works. Therefore, this article will return to this debate to reassess the validity of Schmitt’s critique and to recover another aspect of Peterson’s theology that was ignored by Schmitt, namely, his theology of martyrdom.<sup>6</sup> Published in 1937, when there were no more doubts about Hitler’s intention, “Witness to the Truth” contains Peterson’s theology of martyrdom which represents a countermodel to Schmitt’s political theology of sovereignty.<sup>7</sup> This theology of martyrdom exposes the limits of “the political” by showing that the sovereign does not represent the truth. This article will also evaluate the nature and the political implications of Christianity for both thinkers.

### The Crux of the Matter: Who Decides?

Peterson was raised as a Protestant in an environment of religious indifference<sup>8</sup> and studied theology in Strasburg. In 1921, he established a friendship with Karl Barth, who became an important intellectual reference for him. Other decisive influences on Peterson’s career were Kierkegaard and pietism. In 1924, Peterson was appointed ordinary professor in Bonn where he befriended Carl Schmitt, who was a law professor there at the time. Those were the turbulent times of the Weimar Republic, and the two young men established a close intellectual and personal friendship. Both scholars were interested in the public character of Christianity and the role of religion in modernity. A few years later, Schmitt played a crucial role in Peterson’s conversion to Catholicism, and Peterson witnessed Schmitt’s second, noncanonical, marriage. With the deterioration of the Weimar Republic and Schmitt’s adherence to the Nazi regime, this friendship suffered a fierce blow from which it would never fully recover.

<sup>6</sup>Robben’s work *Märtyrer* presents a systematization of Peterson’s theology of martyrdom, but does not present the political implications of this theology and its role in the theological-political debate with Schmitt (Andreas Robben, *Märtyrer: Theologie des Martyriums bei Erik Peterson* [Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 2007]). Stoll published an excellent and complete analysis of Peterson’s theology which dedicates a whole chapter to Peterson and Schmitt’s relationship, but Peterson’s theology of martyrdom is not placed at the center of his critique of Schmitt (Christian Stoll, *Die Öffentlichkeit der Christus-Krise: Erik Peterson eschatologischer Kirchenbegriff im Kontext der Moderne* [Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2017], 178–248, 349–68).

<sup>7</sup>Erik Peterson, “Witness to the Truth,” in *Theological Tractates*, 174.

<sup>8</sup>Peterson considered his father responsible for his early “atheistic” upbringing, while his mother believed in God even though her faith was never fully connected to any Christian denomination. See Barbara Nichtweiß, *Erik Peterson: Neue Sicht auf Leben und Werk* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1992), 27–28.

Their initial intellectual bond was based on common interests: politics and religion. Their estrangement was grounded on the same issues. The crux of the matter was the topic of political theology. Schmitt places at the center of his political theology “Hobbes’ all-deciding questions: *Quis judicabit? Quis interpretabitur?* [Who will judge? Who will interpret?].”<sup>9</sup> For him, all theological-political problems reach the same critical question: Who has the authority to decide over political and theological matters? Schmitt’s conclusion is that sovereignty can never be divided. Once there are two conflicting groups claiming legitimate authority to decide the law and the religion of the land, the unity of the political body ceases and civil war begins. For him, the Augustinian doctrine of the two cities is irrelevant because it does not provide an answer in the concrete to the question of where the spiritual commences and the law of the state ceases. The separation between the city of God and the earthly city presupposes a political decision. This issue was exemplified in the signing of the Reichskonkordat in 1933 between Hitler’s regime and the Catholic Church. This agreement was supposed to secure the rights of the church, but it was soon violated by the Third Reich. The two thinkers had opposite feelings about the Reichskonkordat. In 1933, Schmitt<sup>10</sup> stood on the side of the “total state” and accepted the party’s favors, “the eternal relation of protection and obedience,”<sup>11</sup> while Peterson went to Rome and took the side of “the witness to the truth.”<sup>12</sup> These decisions would leave an indelible mark on the lives and thought of both thinkers. As Schmitt submits both spiritual and political jurisdiction to the absolute power of the sovereign, Peterson would accuse him of using Christian arguments to justify his political position. For Peterson, this desire for unity in Schmitt’s political theology is not a consequence of Christian revelation but rather its degeneration for political purposes. For him, when the political acquires an absolute character and the sovereign requires political obedience and religious devotion, martyrdom becomes a necessary concept for the church.

<sup>9</sup>Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology II: The Myth of the Closure of Any Political Theology* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 51.

<sup>10</sup>Reinhard Mehring, *Carl Schmitt: A Biography* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014), 308–9.

<sup>11</sup>Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, expanded ed., trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 57–58; Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes: Meaning and Failure of a Political Symbol* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 72, 83.

<sup>12</sup>If in a first moment Peterson’s decision to move to Rome was a deliberate gesture, after 1934 his stay became for him an act of resistance, which implied a significant material sacrifice for him and his family. He did not want to raise his children under National Socialist indoctrination and considered that he had the “right to emigration for the sake of faith.” See Nichtweiß, *Erik Peterson*, 863–68.

### Schmitt's Political Theology of Sovereignty

Written at the same time as *Roman Catholicism and Political Form* (1923),<sup>13</sup> *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (1922)<sup>14</sup> represents a turning point in Schmitt's personal relationship with the church and in his academic interests.<sup>15</sup> Decades later he would even downplay the relevance of *Roman Catholicism* in his intellectual development, arguing that it was just praise for the church with a "rhetorical bent,"<sup>16</sup> a eulogy no longer valid after the Second Vatican Council. In "The Visibility of the Church" (1917) he had argued that Christ was the mediator<sup>17</sup> between God and man and the church was His mean,<sup>18</sup> and in *Roman Catholicism* he affirmed that the church is the representative of Christ on earth, which substantiates its claim for a unique power and authority;<sup>19</sup> but in *Political Theology*, Christ and the church leave the scene and the sovereign becomes analogous to the omnipotent God.<sup>20</sup> This radical shift from the idea of Christ as "the Mediator" and the church as His "representative" to the secularized political theology of sovereignty should not be ignored. Considering that in Christianity "the Mediator," as man-God, is the One who partakes in humans' suffering and offers them the possibility of participation in the divine nature,<sup>21</sup> an essential element of Christianity would disappear from Schmitt's political theology and with that the truth would lose any role in the order of the society and become purely situational.

<sup>13</sup>Carl Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, trans. G. L. Ulmen (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996).

<sup>14</sup>This work was originally published in an edited volume in honor of Max Weber: Carl Schmitt, "Soziologie des Souveränitätsbegriffes und politische Theologie," in *Hauptprobleme der Soziologie: Erinnerungsgabe für Max Weber*, ed. Melchior Palyi, vol. 2 (Munich: Duncker & Humblot, 1923). In this initial version, the last chapter, "On the Counterrevolutionary Philosophy of the State (de Maistre, Bonald, Donoso Cortés)," is absent.

<sup>15</sup>John P. McCormick, "From Roman Catholicism to Mechanized Oppression: On Political-Theological Disjuncture of Schmitt's Weimar Thought," in *Thomas Hobbes and Carl Schmitt: The Politics of Order and Myth*, ed. Johan Tralau (New York: Routledge, 2011), 138; Reinhard Mehring, "A Catholic Layman of German Nationality and Citizenship," in *The Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt*, ed. Jens Meierhenrich and Oliver Simons (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 79.

<sup>16</sup>Schmitt, *Political Theology II*, 47–48.

<sup>17</sup>1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 9:15.

<sup>18</sup>Carl Schmitt, "The Visibility of the Church: A Scholastic Consideration," in *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, 50.

<sup>19</sup>Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism*, 19, 30.

<sup>20</sup>Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 36.

<sup>21</sup>Pierre Manent, *The Metamorphoses of the City: On the Western Dynamic*, trans. Marc LePain (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 311.

Schmitt's idea of political theology can be applied to multiple cases as the concept of sovereignty, representation, and even revolution.<sup>22</sup> At first sight, political theology is a field of knowledge that explores the affinity and systematic structure between theological and juridical concepts. This methodology is relevant because Schmitt holds that "all the significant concepts of modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts."<sup>23</sup> However, for Schmitt, there is not just one political theology, but basically every metaphysical view of the world creates its own political theology to metaphysically legitimize its claim to political power.<sup>24</sup> In this sense, the political acquires an absolute character because every dominant group, which has enough political power to impose its will, can exclude all other metaphysical positions as enemies. By analyzing those different analogies between political and theological, Schmitt recognizes that the political is the total. Any decision about whether something is political or apolitical is already a political decision.<sup>25</sup>

However, Schmitt's political theology is not limited to the methodological investigation of this structural analogy. There is also a normative element in his study. Behind his political theory, as Leo Strauss noted, there is a moral affirmation that brings forward the central question of what the right way of living is.<sup>26</sup> Against Hans Kelsen's deistic liberalism,<sup>27</sup> Schmitt argues for his idiosyncratic theist political theology. While this theology claims that God hovers above the human world and holds that "Thomas Hobbes's most important sentence remains: Jesus is the Christ,"<sup>28</sup> these claims by themselves should not be taken as a Christian profession of faith, at least not in the sense that the Incarnation was understood by the early Christian communities, and especially by the martyrs of the church. At the same time, Schmitt also praises the Grand Inquisitor, who basically condemns Christ to death to protect the theological-political order of society, and dismisses the idea of the living presence of Christ as an artistic fashion.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, his philosophical anthropology shifted radically from his early to his later works. In his early essay, following the Catholic ambiguity, he recognizes that, despite original sin, human nature remains essentially good, "because God can will no evil."<sup>30</sup> However, in subsequent essays his position would

<sup>22</sup>Herrero, *Political Discourse of Carl Schmitt*, 174–77.

<sup>23</sup>Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36.

<sup>24</sup>See Schmitt's essay "Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations," in *The Concept of the Political*, 80–96.

<sup>25</sup>Schmitt's interpretation of the relationship between Protestant theology and political liberalism is a good example of his methodology. See Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 2.

<sup>26</sup>Leo Strauss, "Notes on Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*," in *The Concept of the Political*, 118.

<sup>27</sup>Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 21.

<sup>28</sup>Schmitt, *Glossarium*, 23.5.49; 184.

<sup>29</sup>Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism*, 32.

<sup>30</sup>Schmitt, "Visibility of the Church," 56.



change,<sup>31</sup> and in *The Concept of the Political* he makes his “profession of faith” (*Glaubensbekenntnis*) The proposition that “all genuine political theories presuppose man to be evil.”<sup>32</sup> But why would God sacrifice his only begotten Son to save the hopeless tribe of men? Without a natural goodness to be restored, there will be no room for human free will. Even his peculiar interpretation of the Christian duty to “love your enemy”<sup>33</sup> as referring only to one’s private enemy (*inimicus*) and not to one’s public enemy (*hostis*)<sup>34</sup> is contrary to the universalist claim of the Christian message. For Saint Paul, this message should not be limited by national boundaries, gender, social class, or ethnic identity. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, this is by no means the only reference to enmity in the Gospel. In Romans 11, enmity is not at all reduced to private vendetta, as Schmitt might wish, but is concerned with disobedience towards God and salvation.<sup>36</sup>

While the identification of Schmitt’s political theology with Christianity (the argument for “strong political theology”<sup>37</sup>) is difficult to sustain, there is a case for a specific “theology,” or a metaphysical view of the world, that he considers to be better fitted to explain the human world. Based on his peculiar Christian worldview, he will later develop his theory of the *katechon*,<sup>38</sup> the “restrainer” from 2 Thessalonians 2:6–7, which he considers the only historical concept possible for the original Christian faith because it provides a

<sup>31</sup>In the *Dictatorship* (1921), Schmitt was already dealing with the anthropological roots of political science and considered “anthropological pessimism” as a rational technique of political absolutism (Carl Schmitt, *Dictatorship: From the Origin of the Modern Concept of Sovereignty to the Proletarian Class Struggle* [Cambridge: Polity, 2014], 6). And, in the preface to the second edition of *Political Romanticism* (1925), he identifies in the natural goodness of man and the denial of original sin an important thesis of romanticism, but its pivotal feature was placed in the “subjectified occasionalism” and in the shift from the authority of God to the “genius of the ‘ego’” (Carl Schmitt, *Political Romanticism* [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986], 1–3, 17–18).

<sup>32</sup>Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 58, 61.

<sup>33</sup>Matt. 5:44; Luke 6:27.

<sup>34</sup>Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 28–29.

<sup>35</sup>Gal. 3:28.

<sup>36</sup>Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 51.

<sup>37</sup>Roberts rightly criticizes the hypothesis that Schmitt has a “strong political theology” (Aaron B. Roberts, “Carl Schmitt—Political Theologian?,” *Review of Politics* 77 [2015]: 452).

<sup>38</sup>Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth: In the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*, trans. G. L. Ulmen (New York: Telos, 2006), 62–66; Carl Schmitt, “Three Possibilities for a Christian Conception of History,” *Telos* 147 (Summer 2009): 169; Carl Schmitt, *Land and Sea: A World-Historical Meditation*, trans. Samuel Garrett Zeitlin (Candor, NY: Telos, 2015), 17, 68.

“bridge between the notion of an eschatological paralysis of all human events and a tremendous monolith like that of the Christian Empire of the Germanic kings.”<sup>39</sup> However, this is one of several possible interpretations of an obscure passage. It is noteworthy that Augustine humbly recognizes that he could not know what the apostle meant by the “restrainer” and simply enumerates possible interpretations.<sup>40</sup> This passage, to Augustine rather obscure and open to manifold readings, was appropriated by Schmitt’s political theology because it supports his claim that the political order is essential to hold back the powers of evil and the appearance of the antichrist. However, in Schmitt’s interpretation, evil ceases to be the consequence of individual disobedience towards God and acquires its own “overwhelming power.”<sup>41</sup> Only in a world where evil has a power of its own could hostility be elevated to an almost divine commandment.

Schmitt’s political theology presupposes the Incarnation as the most radical foundation for mundane authority;<sup>42</sup> but Christianity also unleashes anarchical elements that must be restrained by the sovereign as the only instance of mediation between God and man.<sup>43</sup> Schmitt wants a Christianity without the living presence of Christ, without the claim that it is up to every person to participate in the truth. However, the salvation of the individual soul can only be possible with personal responsibility and the possibility of deciding between good and evil. Schmitt offers a Christian theology of original sin without the categories of grace, repentance, and salvation. This theology ultimately seeks an intermundane realization of the divine, similar to what Eric Voegelin calls “political religions.”<sup>44</sup> Against this political concept, in which the sovereign not only becomes the source of political authority but also represents the truth,<sup>45</sup> Peterson presents his theological critique of Schmitt. To understand why Schmitt does not have the final word on the relationship between politics and theology, we should explore Peterson’s critique, which, from a theologian’s perspective, will point towards the limits of the political without being apolitical.

<sup>39</sup>Schmitt, *Nomos of the Earth*, 60.

<sup>40</sup>Augustine, *The City of God*, 20.19.

<sup>41</sup>Schmitt, *Nomos of the Earth*, 60.

<sup>42</sup>As early as the “Visibility of the Church,” Schmitt argues that Christianity provides a new foundation for mundane authority (“Visibility of the Church,” 50–51), and, in his study on the Leviathan, he uses Hobbes’s formula “Jesus is the Christ” to affirm the “eternal relation of protection and obedience” (*Leviathan in the State*, 83).

<sup>43</sup>Schmitt, *Glossarium*, 23.5.49; 184.

<sup>44</sup>Eric Voegelin, “The Political Religions,” in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 5 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000); Thierry Gontier, “From ‘Political Theology’ to ‘Political Religion’: Eric Voegelin and Carl Schmitt,” *Review of Politics* 75 (2013): 36.

<sup>45</sup>Matthias Riedl, “Order,” in *The Encyclopedia of Political Thought*, ed. Michael T. Gibbons (Oxford: Wiley, 2015), 6.



## Peterson's "Monotheism as a Political Problem" and the Theological Annulment of All Political Theology

Peterson was already an active participant in the theological-political debates of the Weimar Republic even before the publication of "Monotheism as a Political Problem," which is his most controversial and best-known work. Prior to that, he was already dealing with the political implications of Christian eschatology and its possible corruption for political purposes. He wrote two brief essays in which he criticizes the concept of political theology as formulated by Schmitt. In "Göttliche Monarchie" (1931), he analyzes the concept of divine monarchy in Greek philosophy and how this concept was used by the Roman emperors as a metaphysical justification for Roman domination over the whole *oikumene*. Among the early Christians, Peterson identifies in Eusebius of Caesarea an attempt to establish in this world a divine monarchy. By referring to Eusebius's "theology" only in quotation marks,<sup>46</sup> Peterson was already indicating that Eusebius's speculations were not part of Christian theology, but an instrument of political power. Before Schmitt's involvement with the Nazi regime,<sup>47</sup> Peterson wrote "Kaiser Augustus im Urteil des antiken Christentums: Ein Beitrag zur the Geschichte der politischen Theologie" (Emperor Augustus in the judgment of ancient Christianity: A contribution to the history of political theology) (1933) in which he credits Schmitt with introducing the field of political theology. However, Peterson distances himself from his friend by arguing that "political theology is not, by its nature, an integral part of theology, but rather of political thought."<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, he argues that political theology is a recurrent phenomenon that is regarded with hesitation by theologians because of its heretical elements.<sup>49</sup> With the destruction of the gods of the city and the empire by Christianity and the consequent desacralization of political life, political theology tries to reharmonize public life with a new metaphysical and theological foundation. Within Christianity, Eusebius, who was regarded as "court theologian" of Constantine, was the pioneer in

<sup>46</sup>Erik Peterson, "Göttliche Monarchie," *Theologische Quartalschrift* 4 (1931): 562–63.

<sup>47</sup>Herrero's argument that Peterson kept his distance from Schmitt and criticized him in "Monotheism" to preserve his "political correctness" is historically incorrect (Herrero, *Political Discourse of Carl Schmitt*, 167). Herrero accepts Schmitt's self-image as someone who received a "Parthian attack" from Peterson while he was running away to Rome. However, Peterson's critique of the theological foundations of Schmitt's thought in his two earlier essays ("Kaiser Augustus" and "Göttliche Monarchie") were prior to Schmitt's embracing the new regime.

<sup>48</sup>Erik Peterson, "Kaiser Augustus im Urteil des antiken Christentums: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der politischen Theologie," in *Religionstheorie und Politischen Theologie*, vol. 1, *Der Fürst dieser Welt: Carl Schmitt und die Folgen*, ed. Jacob Taubes, 2nd ed. (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag / Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 1985), 174.

<sup>49</sup>Peterson, "Kaiser Augustus," 174.

the development of a theological justification for the empire as part of the Christian history of salvation. The problem with such development is that it transforms Christian eschatology into a political utopia that no longer waits for what is beyond history.<sup>50</sup> Thus, according to Peterson, Eusebius's political theology of the Roman Empire, which sought to realize the political utopia of a world state, was a demonic imitation of Christ's kingship.<sup>51</sup>

The arguments of these two articles were used as the groundwork for Peterson's essay "Monotheism." The essay takes the form of a historical-philosophical analysis of the concepts of monotheism and divine monarchy during the first five centuries of Christianity. Its apparent detachment from the political events of the time was, in part, an erudite cover for Peterson's intentions. Dedicated to Saint Augustine, it was a warning sign to his old friend and a specific critique of his political theology.<sup>52</sup> The quotation from Augustine's *De vera religione* is revealing: "Pride in a manner seeks unity and omnipotence, but in the realm of natural things, where all things are transient like a shadow."<sup>53</sup> Schmitt is personally named only in the last footnote as the one who first introduced the term "political theology" in the literature, a literature that Peterson considered illegitimate in his concluding remarks. Moreover, Peterson was also attacking the *Reichstheologie* (theology of the Reich), which was popular among Catholic supporters of Hitler.<sup>54</sup> *Reichstheologie* maintained that the Third Reich was a continuation of the Holy Roman Empire, and that this new Reich should overcome Enlightenment and restore a political life based on Catholic principles. In political-theological terms, the political order should emulate the divine order, so one God in heaven should correspond to one Führer on earth. In addition to this metaphysical and political parallel between divine and human hierarchy, Peterson also recognized a historical analogy between the position of some Catholics regarding the Third Reich and Eusebius's justification for the alliance between the church and the Roman Empire.

Peterson argues that there was an ancient and pervasive tradition of political theology that legitimized earthly monarchy based on the idea that God rules monarchically over the whole cosmos. Aristotle concludes Book XII of the *Metaphysics* with a quotation from the *Iliad* that suggests a metaphysical unity with a political metaphor: "beings do not want to be governed badly; 'the rule of many is not good, let the one be ruler.'"<sup>55</sup> For Peterson, any formulation of a metaphysical unity of the world also corresponds to a decision in favor of a particular political regime and exposes a metaphysical-political

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 177.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 180.

<sup>52</sup>See Taubes's letter in *Political Theology of Paul*, 110–11.

<sup>53</sup>Augustine, *De vera religione* 43.84.

<sup>54</sup>Hollerich, "Catholic Anti-liberalism in Weimar," 24–25.

<sup>55</sup>Aristotle, *Metaphysics* XII.10, 1076a.

problem.<sup>56</sup> To investigate this problem, he discusses three peoples and their respective political forms: Christians, Jews, and pagans. By establishing this connection between metaphysical representation and political regimes, he is in accordance with Schmitt's methodological use of political theology, but reaches a different conclusion regarding Christianity.

The theological-political structure of Jewish people, according to Peterson, was based on the formula "One people and one God," because "the *one* God is not just the monarch of Israel but also of the cosmos, therefore the one people ruled by this cosmic monarch ... becomes the priest and the prophets for the whole human race."<sup>57</sup> Thus, the chosen people of Israel would assume the political form of a theocracy with God as the ruler of His people. This structure would justify Jewish mission and superiority over all the other nations.

For Roman paganism, polytheism was an attempt to neutralize the differences among the ethnic gods of the empire by subsuming those gods under one highest god, the god of the empire. Thus, for a pagan like Celsus, Christians and Jews were raising the spirit of revolt against the empire by putting themselves above the rest of men and denying the multiplicity of gods. When they talk about their God and reject all the other divinities, they are in fact projecting their own ethnic god as the only true God. But if the supreme God created different peoples with distinct gods and subjected all those peoples to one empire, the god of the empire must be the true God and the order of the empire must be the true order. Whoever puts himself against this order, on behalf of his own religion, is raising the voice of revolution and threatening the peace of Rome. "In this revolt, Celsus sees reflected the Jewish-Christian character of being a closed group apart from the rest of humanity."<sup>58</sup> By destroying the national cults in the name of a Christian God, Christians were at the end of the day destroying all ethnic particularities and trying to unify various nations under a single law. In his final analysis, Celsus considers them a political threat to the Roman Empire because of their theological views.

Against Celsus's objections, Origen answers with an eschatological prophecy. National pluralism will cease only at the Final Judgment, when God assembles all nations and ends the confusion by giving to all men one language. Thus, with Origen, the theological political problem appears under a new perspective. Instead of unifying the spiritual with the temporal, he sought to reconcile Christian proclamation with national differences.<sup>59</sup> Thus, the Christian eschatological expectation lessens the relevance of national differences by pointing towards the common destiny of mankind in the church. However, the church does not have the prerogative to rule

<sup>56</sup>Peterson, "Monotheism as a Political Problem," 71.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 73.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 88.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 90.

over this cosmos, as the political *cosmopolis* of Rome, but promises a new cosmos that will be purified from sin and the mystery of division.<sup>60</sup> The biblical account of the Tower of Babel tells that human unity was shattered as a divine punishment because of man's growing sin; as such, the restoration of this unity is beyond the power and possibility of man. It depends on God's sovereign will. Consequently, this ends up delegitimizing all political claim to universality.

However, this eschatological interpretation did not prevent early Christians from developing a theological political analogy between the *Pax Romana* and the appearance of Christ. Amazed by the political success of the empire, Eusebius identified the end of national pluralism under Roman hegemony as a sign of the Second Coming of Christ and His divine monarchy. Thus, he shifted Origen's interpretation of the theological-political problem to "a standpoint that is not eschatological but historical and political"<sup>61</sup> and returned to the formula of the divine monarchy: one divine monarch in heaven must correspond to one monarch on earth. Peterson identifies in Eusebius's words not the discourse of a theologian but the rhetoric of a political propagandist. Unsurprisingly, those ideas became popular among early Christians, especially within Arianism which reduced Christian faith to a simple monotheism. By denying the doctrine of consubstantiality, subordinating the Son to the Father, and supporting the idea of divine monarchy, Arianism became very influential in the court of Constantine. In this doctrine, monotheism recovers its political meaning and becomes "a political imperative, a piece of *Reichspolitik*."<sup>62</sup>

These apparently historical remarks on Arianism were another coded message from Peterson to his old friend. By rejecting the centrality of Christ and trying to restrain its most "anarchical elements," Schmitt was denying the Christian Trinitarian dogma and, at the end of the day, was subordinating the church to the destiny of the Reich. For Peterson, it was the triumph of orthodox Trinitarian doctrine against Arianism that separated the fate of the church from the fall of the empire. Since then, Christians have professed the monarchy of the triune God, which has "no correspondence in the created reality."<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, Peterson recognizes that the personal aspect of the

<sup>60</sup>See Joseph Ratzinger, *The Unity of the Nations: A Vision of the Church Fathers* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2015). On the theological-political problem of Christian proclamation and the unity of the nations, the influence of Peterson's "Monotheism" on Ratzinger's work is clear in the latter's abundant references to "Monotheism." Even the structure of Ratzinger's argument follows Peterson. It begins with a discussion of Origen, then it criticizes the political theology of the Roman Empire and Eusebius's attempt to create "political theocracy." Finally, the book concludes with a defense of an Augustinian "theology of the political."

<sup>61</sup>Peterson, "Monotheism as a Political Problem," 95.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, 103.

Christian God excludes the possibility of a theological-political unity, because no ruler, only Christ himself, can legitimately claim the position of king of the coming world. Finally, the last blow to the theological justification of the Roman Empire was given by Augustine when he revealed the dubious character of the Augustan peace. The empire waged several wars, civil revolts erupted in the four corners of the *oikumene*, and sectarian violence occurred throughout the empire, including the persecution of Christians, so the idea of *Pax Romana* is questionable. Augustine, consequently, clearly rejects the connection of the Roman peace with the Christian peace. As a consequence, the eschatological dimension of Christianity, which is based on the triune divinity, prevents the identification of the Christian peace with any historical political entity. Thus, Peterson argues in his concluding remarks that “the peace that the Christians seek is won by no emperor, but is solely a gift of Him who ‘is higher than all understanding.’”<sup>64</sup> Since then, any attempt to use the Gospel to justify a unity of the political with the theological became a degeneration of the Christian message for political purposes.

### Schmitt and the Myth of the Closure of Any Political Theology

Ten years after Peterson’s death, Schmitt published *Political Theology II: The Myth of the Closure of Any Political Theology* (1970) as a defense of his arguments from 1922 and a critique of the supposedly apolitical character of Peterson’s thought. He suggests that Peterson’s polemic was an “intra-theological self-critique and self-destruction, an unintended annulment of any belief in God being politically relevant, or of any socially relevant theology at all.”<sup>65</sup> Thus, this theology would remove the church from the public sphere and, because of its incapacity to decide between friends and enemies, it would leave a vacuum to be occupied by a political enemy. Although Schmitt criticizes the allegedly apolitical character of Peterson’s theological ideas, it is impossible to deny the polemical, and even political, aspect of Peterson’s work. Peterson was dealing with a current crisis by means of a historical-theological treatise. As far as the theological-political problem is concerned, Peterson remains faithful to the Augustinian teaching of the two cities. Schmitt, conversely, considers that Peterson misunderstood the nature of modernity and chose a political theology that is not suitable to the concrete historical experience. “Peterson ignores the crisis of the modern problematic of church/state/society. Neither of these kingdoms is any longer distinguishable, either in matter or content.”<sup>66</sup> With the revolutionary spirit of the modern age, the traditional wall that separated the church from the state is no longer effective. Therefore, the unity of those spheres can potentially be

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 105.

<sup>65</sup>Schmitt, *Political Theology II*, 35.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 44.

achieved by a revolutionary class. Alleging the failure of the Augustinian interpretation, Schmitt argues that even apparently purely theological disputes, such as the controversy over the divine nature,<sup>67</sup> have a political-theological nature. Furthermore, by taking the bishop Eusebius as a model of a political-theologian, Peterson was extrapolating this example out of the context of the Roman Empire and using it as a model to explain all the possible arrangements between politics and religion. As a result, for Schmitt, Peterson's concluding remarks on the impossibility of all political theology is just "a beautiful myth."<sup>68</sup>

The Council of Nicaea, for Schmitt, was exemplary about the limits of Peterson's interpretation as it provides the best test case for the separation between politics and theology. The council was convened by the emperor Constantine to solve the Arian controversy over the substantial relation between God the Father and God the Son. This theological disagreement was creating social and political unrest among Christian communities that were disturbing the peace of the empire. Under the protection of the emperor, the council was surrounded by court intrigues, popular turmoil, and ecclesiastic revolts. For Schmitt, this exemplifies how "countless church fathers and canonical teachers, martyrs and saints throughout the ages have passionately engaged in the political struggles of their time because of their Christian convictions."<sup>69</sup> Amid this political turmoil, in Schmitt's view, Eusebius's rapprochement with the empire and Constantine was a humble attempt to maintain the existing order and to preserve peace. However, despite the triumph of Trinitarian orthodoxy, Arianism remained influential, especially in the Eastern Church. By slightly overemphasizing "the non-identity of the Father with the Son and the subordination of the Son to the Father,"<sup>70</sup> Eusebius kept his Arian convictions, even though he had accepted the Nicæan Creed. Thus, "semi-Arians like Eusebius continued to understand the divine monarchy by analogy with the monarchy of the Roman Emperor, in which power derives from a single person (the Father) to the exclusion of all others."<sup>71</sup> This Arian emphasis on the sole monarchy of the Father favored a political theology in which the emperor was the image of God the Father, and as such he should hold both the crosier and the sword.

The baptism of Constantine by the pro-Arian bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia<sup>72</sup> and Eusebius of Caesarea's description of Constantine as "like

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 43.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 31.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., 83.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 82.

<sup>71</sup>Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, "The Trinity and Politics," in *Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*, ed. Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 537.

<sup>72</sup>Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*, ed. and trans. Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), 177 (4.61–62). See also Commentary, 341–42.



a universal bishop appointed by God<sup>73</sup> promoted the idea that the Roman Emperor should be responsible for the destiny of the empire as well as the church. "As the theoretician, Eusebius had to respond to the massive problem of a Roman *universalitas* which had previously been political and was now religious."<sup>74</sup> To solve this new problem, he developed a "political theology" where God the Father was the cause of all things, and the divine *Logos*, His son, occupies a slightly inferior position as a minister of his Father's will.<sup>75</sup> Parallel to this structure, the converted Christian emperor will inherit this intermediary position from Christ and, as the emperor chosen by God, he will have the mission to eradicate paganism, to spread the Gospel, and to unify all peoples. Thus, the emperor and the empire would become a divine instrument in the history of salvation. Eusebius developed a political theology where the universalism of Christian revelation and the political universalism of the Roman Empire were merged in an attempt to create a Christian version of the original unity between royal and sacerdotal powers.<sup>76</sup>

This Eusebian "political theology," where the authority of the church is under the protection of and directly supports the temporal power of the emperor, is in agreement with Schmitt's desire for unity between temporal and spiritual powers. This also explains Schmitt's defense of the Reichskonkordat as a way to transform the church into an instrument for the stability of the Third Reich in exchange for protection of certain ecclesiastical prerogatives. Peterson, on the other hand, defends another model where the church can assist the civil government, but at the same time must retain its sovereign power and freedom. In his essay "The Church" (1928), Peterson mentions that there is a public-legal character of Christian religion in which something of the political desire of the Jews for the Kingdom and the public character of the Greek *ekklēsia* (assembly) clings to the church. In this sense, the church is not fully a political-religious entity like the Kingdom, but it is also not a solely spiritual entity. This quasi-political character is manifested in its struggle for legal legitimacy.<sup>77</sup> The legal legitimacy permits the church to make its own sovereign dogmatic decisions and to exist as an independent entity instead of as an "official church" under the umbrella of the state. Besides this principle, however, the church also has an element of

<sup>73</sup>Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 87 (1.44).

<sup>74</sup>Gilbert Dagron, *Emperor and Priest: The Imperial Office in Byzantium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 131.

<sup>75</sup>Timothy D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 173.

<sup>76</sup>This intellectual development gave birth to the political idea of "caesaropapism" which, nevertheless, was never fully adopted in Byzantium. See Dagron, *Emperor and Priest*, 132 and chap. 9.

<sup>77</sup>Erik Peterson, "The Church," in *Theological Tractates*, 37.

“pneumatic freedom” (*pneumatishcer Freiheit*),<sup>78</sup> which has a decisive impact in the political sphere and provides a characteristic that, as opposed to legitimacy, does not originally belong to the concept of the state and ends up shattering its unity. To avoid the instability that this new category of pneumatic freedom brings to political unity, Schmitt wants to neutralize the content of Christian revelation and its spiritual freedom without losing some of its legitimating aspects.<sup>79</sup> However, for Peterson’s theology, the political claim for a unification of the temporal and the spiritual powers was delegitimized by the appearance of Christ and His church. Thus, for Peterson, any attempt to negate the effectiveness of the Christian spirit and the influence of the church does not belong to a Christian concept of politics, but is rather an attempt to return to paganism and its civil religion.<sup>80</sup> Against Schmitt’s doctrine of sovereignty, Peterson makes a political assertion in favor of a free and independent church that can exercise its indirect power (*potestas indirecta*).

Defending Eusebius’s tradition that the Roman Empire has a providential role, Schmitt, on the other hand, reaffirms his doctrine of the *katechon* in which political authority has the God-given mission of withholding the appearance of the antichrist and delaying the Parousia. Furthermore, he also accuses Peterson of having a different interpretation of the *katechon* in which “the unbelief of the Jews, their continued refusal, until the present day, to become Christians withholds the end of the Christian aeon.”<sup>81</sup> This attempt by Schmitt to win the argument by pointing to a supposed theological anti-Semitism of a scholar who was no longer able to defend himself is at the least unfair and wrong,<sup>82</sup> especially considering that Peterson’s argument in “The Church” goes in the opposite direction.<sup>83</sup> Because of the refusal of the Jews, for Peterson, the apostolic mission changed from the creation of the messianic Kingdom of the Jews to the establishment of the Church of the Gentiles. Paul, the converted Jew and apostle to the Gentiles, “explicitly

<sup>78</sup>Stoll, *Die Öffentlichkeit der Christus-Krise*, 197.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., 198.

<sup>80</sup>In a postcard from August 13, 1938, Peterson criticizes Schmitt’s book on the Leviathan and argues that the polemic against “indirect powers” makes sense only if one renounces one’s claim to be a Christian and decides in favor of paganism: “die Polemik gegen die potestas indirecta hat nur dann einen Sinn, wenn man darauf verzichtet, ein Christ zu sein und sich für das Heidentum entschieden hat” (Landesarchiv Nordrhein-Westfalen, Standort Duisburg [Nachlass Carl Schmitt], RW 579, no. 270).

<sup>81</sup>Schmitt, *Political Theology II*, 92.

<sup>82</sup>Agamben uncritically accepts Schmitt’s interpretation and unfairly accuses Peterson of endorsing the extermination of Jews. See Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 7, 16.

<sup>83</sup>For a fair account of Peterson’s interest in and relationship with Judaism, see Nichtweiß, *Erik Peterson*, 545–49.

says in Romans 11:25 that once the ordained number is in, then all Israel will also be saved."<sup>84</sup> What is delaying the Parousia is no longer the refusal of the Jews, but the fact that the church has not yet fulfilled its mission of calling the Gentiles. Under the work of the Holy Spirit, God has called the Twelve to create a church and call the Gentiles "so that, when their number is full, all Israel will be blessed, and after that will come the End."<sup>85</sup> In "The Church from Jews and Gentiles" (1933), Peterson goes even further and argues that "no power of this world will be able to eliminate Judaism. ... Rather synagogue and *ekklésia* belong together until the Last day."<sup>86</sup>

The difference between both thinkers becomes more evident in their divergent understanding of the structure of the eschatological time. As Giorgio Agamben observes, this structure is twofold: "on one side, there is a restrainer element (*katechon*, identified with an institution, whether the empire or the Church), and, on the other side, there is a decisive element (the Messiah)."<sup>87</sup> Schmitt only sees it through the perspective of the *katechon*. The *mysterium iniquitatis* (the mystery of evil), which Paul refers to in the Second Letter to Thessalonians, is understood as something that is beyond the capacity of the individual human being to act; only the sovereign can restrain it. However, Peterson, through a messianic perspective, recognizes that every human being is called to decide in favor of the truth or against it. The *mysterium iniquitatis* demands an individual positive response against it on earth and in time for the salvation of those who participate in the historical drama. Josef Pieper, strongly influenced by Peterson's theology of martyrdom, also reached a similar conclusion about the eschatological destiny of man. "The Christian attitude to history contains both affirmation of creation and readiness for blood-testimony; only the man who combines in himself this affirmation and this readiness will retain the possibility of historical activity."<sup>88</sup> In Schmitt's concept of history, however, we have only affirmation of created reality without readiness to stand for the truth and to call evil by its name. As a jurist, he wants to preserve the concrete order so that chaos does not emerge. Peterson, as a theologian, does not distract himself with temporary peace.

From his eschatological perspective, Peterson knows that all earthly powers are transient like shadows and that no Caesar or Führer can assure real peace because the irruption of the Messiah in time has revealed the essential illegitimacy of any spiritual claim by earthly powers. For Schmitt, however, secularization has destroyed the faith in the beyond and, as a result, the only way of restraining chaos is through a dictatorship. He has no hopes for a separation

<sup>84</sup>Peterson, "The Church," 32.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., 39.

<sup>86</sup>Erik Peterson, "The Church from Jews and Gentiles," in *Theological Tractates*, 52.

<sup>87</sup>Giorgio Agamben, *O Mistério do Mal: Bento XVI e o Fim dos Tempos* (São Paulo: Boitempo, 2014), 40.

<sup>88</sup>Josef Pieper, *The End of Time: A Meditation on the Philosophy of History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), 138.

between the temporal and spiritual powers because this was the political form of an age that is buried in the past. Peterson, on the other hand, believes that any Christian understanding of politics must adhere to an “eschatological proviso” (*eschatologische Vorbehalt*)<sup>89</sup> which presupposes the coming of a new creation,<sup>90</sup> and that, in this *cosmos*, the power of Christ is found by sharing in His suffering and by becoming like Him in His death.<sup>91</sup> Citizenship in the heavenly city comes through participation in the divine suffering, not through the earthly realization of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom is something essentially different from earthly power and beyond human design. The consequence of this eschatological proviso is that Christian revelation has a different meaning than the Kingdom of the Jews. If, in the Kingdom of the Jews, the Glory of God is revealed in the publicity of the political, in Christianity, the Glory of God is revealed in opposition to the political power of the Roman Empire and the religious-political power of the Jews.<sup>92</sup> Consequently, this eschatological proviso removes from the political and the state their former sacred aura and opens a space in the public realm for the existence of an independent church, which testifies that no earthly empire can claim to be the realization of the Divine Kingdom.<sup>93</sup> However, the disintegration of the “original unity” was not a peaceful historical event and, in this struggle, the martyrs play an essential role by reminding the people that the political authorities have lost their power over the soul of man. Thus, based on this faith, Peterson understands that Christian peace is a gift which is beyond all rationality and cannot be part of any political project. For him, the recognition of the limits of the political, what it can and what it cannot achieve, is already a superior form of knowledge. Therefore, instead of withdrawing from politics, he is arguing for a realistic political engagement, which should not demand the restoration of the “original unity” but rather should protect the pneumatic freedom of man. Rather than advocating for an apolitical space for theology, Peterson is showing the limits of the political. This position is clarified in his theology of martyrdom.

### Peterson's Theology of Martyrdom

Considering the centrality of martyrdom in Peterson's theology,<sup>94</sup> it is difficult to understand why this topic was ignored by Schmitt, especially because, in

<sup>89</sup>Gabino Uríbarri Bilbao, “La Reserva Escatologica: Genesi del Concetto in Erik Peterson,” *Pontificia Academia Theologica* 12 (2013): 273–313.

<sup>90</sup>Gal. 5:15; 2 Cor. 5:16–17.

<sup>91</sup>Rom. 6:5.

<sup>92</sup>Kurt Anglet, *Der eschatologische Vorbehalt: Eine Denkfigur Erik Peterson* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2001), 30.

<sup>93</sup>Nichtweiß, *Erik Peterson*, 768.

<sup>94</sup>*Ibid.*, 179.

his theology of martyrdom, Peterson's interpretation of Christianity acquires a public and visible character and becomes a critique of the political development of "total states and total lies."<sup>95</sup> Thus, as an outcome of his early studies on Kierkegaard, his intellectual reflections on martyrdom were compiled in the essay "Witness to the Truth" (1937).<sup>96</sup> Here Peterson's personal life and his intellectual influences merge. On the intellectual level, inspired by Kierkegaard, he claims that existence means suffering and dying for the truth and that this truth finds its correspondence in the life of martyrs and saints.<sup>97</sup> In "Was ist der Mensch?," he argues that the martyr is the highest form of convergence with Christ. The martyr realizes what Kierkegaard called "the simultaneity with Christ" (*die Gleichzeitigkeit mit Christus*). In this sense, one can say that the martyr is "the most human."<sup>98</sup> Thus, in Peterson's theology of martyrdom, the martyr is placed once again at the center of the Christian self-understanding in order to recover the experience of the early church. On the personal level, this interpretation put Peterson directly in conflict with Protestant Christendom and its refusal to venerate the saints and martyrs, which culminated in his conversion to Catholicism.

The martyr, which in Greek literally means "witness," has a distinct charismatic role because he demonstrates to the present age the public claim of the church of Christ. By using the public space, martyrs testify in front of public authorities and even ecclesiastical authorities that the highest good of man is not political but eschatological. Contrary to Schmitt, who believes that the state is absolute because it can demand the sacrifice of human life,<sup>99</sup> Peterson holds that only God can demand and give meaning to immolation. Martyrdom, therefore, is not a mere human misunderstanding by which an innocent man is condemned to death because of a misjudgment on the part of the political powers, but rather carries necessarily a divine

<sup>95</sup>While Peterson's works do not deal directly with current political events, his concerns about the deterioration of the political situation in Germany can be observed in his letter to Jacques Maritain from January 3, 1936 (Erik Peterson, "Der Mensch in seiner Welt," in *Offenbarung des Johannes und Politisch-Theologische Texte*, ed. Barbara Nichtweiß [Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 2004], 255).

<sup>96</sup>This essay is a compilation of three earlier articles: "Der Märtyrer und die Kirche" (The martyr and the church), "Die Offenbarung und die Märtyrer" (The revelation and the martyrs), and "Die Märtyrer und das priesterliche Königtum Christi" (The martyrs and the priestly kingship of Christ). In the *Theological Tractates*, it is preceded by the essay "Christ as *Imperator*" (1936), which deals with similar topics and was written at the time of the radicalization of the Nazi dictatorship.

<sup>97</sup>Erik Peterson, "Existentialismus und protestantische Theologie," in *Marginalien zur Theologie und andere Schriften* (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1995), 54.

<sup>98</sup>Erik Peterson, "Was ist der Mensch?," in *Theologische Traktate: Mit einer Einleitung von Barbara Nichtweiß* (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1994), 138.

<sup>99</sup>Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 71.

aspect. "It belongs to the concept of the martyr to be brought for reckoning before the public organs of the state—in councils, and synagogues, before governors and kings—to be subjected to a public judicial proceeding and the penalties of public law."<sup>100</sup> However, martyrdom should not be regarded merely as an act of accusation against the perpetrators, intended to blame an unjust tyrant who violates the law or the sense of justice; this interpretation would detach the event from its eschatological meaning by transforming it into a mere act of protest against political authorities. The distinctiveness of Christian martyrdom is "the revelation of a new reality."<sup>101</sup> Following the example of Christ's sacrifice, the martyrs testify before the altar of the rulers of this world that the present order does not represent the true order and that the public authority has lost its grip on the human soul. For Peterson, the emblematic moment in this separation of truth from politics is when Pontius Pilate turned to Jesus and asked him "What is the truth?"<sup>102</sup> Pilate "formulates the theoretical question about what truth itself is but avoids the practical decision in favor of the king who has come into the world to appear as a witness to the truth."<sup>103</sup> From that moment on, the earthly powers have denied the possibility of a metaphysical union between truth and the political community. Since then, not a single political society can claim, in good faith, to be the true political order or the people of God.

So, with one blow, the martyr reveals the powers that rule this world and also bears witness to the superiority of a coming one. This does not mean that principalities, powers, and thrones have lost their usefulness for man.<sup>104</sup> Political authority continues to be needed to give unity and order to man; but it has lost its claim to embody the true meaning of human existence. Such authority is not at all destroyed by the blood testimony of the martyr, but rather is dethroned because man will no longer attain his fulfillment through it. With the martyrs, the world does not cease to be a great tribulation, but their witnessing helps to illuminate and distinguish the source of good from the source of evil. Peterson's theology of martyrdom, therefore, is not an apolitical theology, as Schmitt asserts. Martyrdom is a public claim, not a private matter. It is a public affirmation of the truth, not a bourgeois indifference.

The eschatological component of Peterson's theology, far from entailing a withdrawal from this world and its history, opens a new perspective for the historical existence of man. History can no longer be read as a purely

<sup>100</sup>Erik Peterson, "Witness to the Truth," in *Theological Tractates*, 157.

<sup>101</sup>Erik Peterson, "Martirio e Martire," in *Enciclopedia Cattolica*, vol. 8 (Vatican City: L'Enciclopedia Cattolica, 1948), 233–36.

<sup>102</sup>John 18:38.

<sup>103</sup>Peterson, "Witness to the Truth," 174.

<sup>104</sup>For a good interpretation of the Pauline concept of "powers" (*exousia*) and its political-theological relevance, see Hendrik Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1977).



immanent process ruled by evil forces against which the common man's best hope is a "catechontic" force, or a Führer. As during the public trial against Christ, the rulers of the old aeon called the people to decide in favor of or against Him. This public act introduced an element of decision in the present time.<sup>105</sup> So, the time frame between the Crucifixion of Christ and the expectation of the Second Coming created a "crisis" in the human relationship with political power that breaks its immanent logic. It is not coincidence that the Greek word for decision is *krisis*. From Peterson's perspective, human historical existence is not a long withdrawal from a world that is growing old, but an existence in crisis, where man is constantly being called on to decide in favor of or against the truth. Thus, Hitler's rise to power did not happen out of a historical necessity to control chaos, but was the outcome of a series of individual decisions, including Schmitt's decision to support the regime. Peterson never advocated a Christian neutrality in the face of Hitler's regime; this was the position of Schmitt, who wanted to neutralize the church and put it into the service of the Reich. This effort to neutralize in the political sphere the element of "crisis" that Christian revelation brought into the world belongs not to theology but to a secular ideology that emulates pagan civil theology. This attempt to solve the "crisis" by abdicating all human decision in favor of the sovereign would inevitably bring Christians into conflict with this total power. And martyrdom, once again, would become an instrument in this struggle that would demand a position of every human being. "In the time of martyrdom there is in the political order no possible concept of political activity based on alleged neutrality."<sup>106</sup> On this point, Peterson and Schmitt agree that in a moment of decision liberal neutrality in the name of scientific objectivity is not enough. However, their understanding of the right decision and the true source of order could not be more different. While Schmitt chose to neutralize internal conflicts to consolidate the state as the only entity capable of deciding and restraining chaos, Peterson stood on the side of the sacrificial victims so that their sacrifice can reveal the face of evil and make it publicly visible that the sovereign is not the source of the divine truth, but only the source of human authority and violence.

Schmitt's sovereign and Peterson's martyr enter into direct conflict with one another because they have opposing views regarding the source of truth. As the will of Schmitt's sovereign decides upon the friend-enemy grouping,<sup>107</sup> it

<sup>105</sup>Robben, *Märtyrer*, 66.

<sup>106</sup>Peterson, "Witness to the Truth," 167.

<sup>107</sup>In *The Concept of the Political* Schmitt deals mainly with the concept of "real enemy," or public enemy, but in *Theory of the Partisan* he expands his analysis to encompass civil war and the concept of "absolute enemy," or foe. For references to this distinction, see George Schwab, "Enemy or Foe: A Conflict of Modern Politics," *Telos* 72 (Summer 1987): 194–201; and G. L. Ulmen, "Return of the Foe," *Telos* 72 (Summer 1987): 187–93.

also decides upon what is truth and what is untruth. As in Hobbes's *Leviathan*, Schmitt identifies in the sovereign the only criterion for the true order, because only he can overcome the fear of violent death in the name of the highest good, which is political peace. However, in his interpretation of Hobbes, Schmitt in fact blames Hobbes for leaving a "visible crack in the theoretical justification of the sovereign state."<sup>108</sup> By leaving the door open for the differentiation between inner and outer confession, Hobbes opens the way for political liberalism. This, for Schmitt, was a decisive turn in the fate of the Leviathan. After defeating the estates and the church, the absolute power of the state culminates in the affirmation of the freedom of thought in the private realm and the negation of the possibility of the original unity between the political and the spiritual. As a result, the absolute state is replaced by the bourgeois constitutional state. The myth of the Leviathan failed because it was unable to restore this "natural unity"<sup>109</sup> and, consequently, it lost the battle against indirect powers.

Peterson, on the other hand, also analyzes the problem of sovereignty and the attempt to combine the political and ecclesiastical authorities in the late Roman Empire in his essay "Christ as *Imperator*" (1936). With the decline of traditional political institutions of the Roman Republic, which allowed greater tolerance for those outside the cult of the Roman gods, there emerged a new form of personal political authority, the Caesar as a leader (Führer) who sought to unify all the power in himself. With the decadence of political institutions, the person of the sovereign becomes more important than the traditional cult of the Roman state. "From the standpoint of the political logic of a pagan state, it was thoroughly consistent for the actual bearer of political power also to become the actual recipient of religious devotion."<sup>110</sup> Thus, the previous tolerance is replaced by the intolerance of the imperial cult in which the divine is present in the person of the emperor, and consequently this new unified divine and political authority can no longer be questioned or divided. Truth and politics are personified in Caesar. Peterson's writings on martyrdom suggest that the political iconography of Caesar was emulated by the leaders of totalitarian mass movements. He was aware of the sociological impact of mass society in political and civil institutions and how old institutions could degenerate into an imperial cult (*Kaiserkult*). As had already happened in the transition from the Roman Republic to the Empire, the new Nazi cult of leadership was a modern secular attempt to reunify *auctoritas* and *potestas* in one person.<sup>111</sup> If the Roman emperors were identified with the antichrist because they waged

<sup>108</sup>Schmitt, *Leviathan in the State*, 57.

<sup>109</sup>*Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>110</sup>Erik Peterson, "Christ as *Imperator*," in *Theological Tractates*, 148.

<sup>111</sup>Erik Peterson, "Der Kaiserkult: Zur Einführung in die Offenbarung des Johannes," in *Offenbarung des Johannes und Politisch-Theologische Texte*, 9.

wars against saints and martyrs and demanded religious devotion from the people, modern totalitarian leaders should also receive the stamp of the antichrist.

In a world where actual political institutions no longer exist because Caesar had essentially transcended all, the accommodation between church and state is no longer a possibility because accommodation would mean actual subordination. It is in this context that the juxtaposition of “Christ” with “emperor” emerged as “a polemical symbol of an actual struggle. ... Christ—who is emperor—and Christians—who belong to the *militia Christi*—are symbols of a struggle for an eschatological *imperium* that opposes to all *imperia* of this world.”<sup>112</sup> The martyrs are summoned to participate, as members of the militia of Christ, in a struggle for power in favor of Christ and His church. Conflict between the martyr and the sovereign becomes inevitable because the martyr wants to make the truth of Christ visible in the public sphere, while Schmitt’s sovereign, who claims political monopoly over the truth, cannot tolerate the publicity of Christian revelation, which delegitimizes his authority and exposes his transience. This delegitimization of the sovereign authority, however, does not mean that the purpose of the church and the testimony of the martyr is to annihilate the present political system and to install a different political constitution.<sup>113</sup> The point is not to replace the sovereign’s authority by a theocracy centered in the church but to keep the public sphere open to the eschatological faith. The martyrs want to overcome a worldview that has closed itself to the transcendent truth and has made the immanent power of the sovereign the only source of truth. For Peterson, the “crack” that Hobbes left open in *Leviathan* is a necessary element for a Christian understanding of politics. As the possibility of Christ’s sovereignty in this world was rejected by Him when He replied to Pilate that His “kingdom is not of this world,”<sup>114</sup> the survival of the church relies on the impossibility of the restoration of the original unity between the spiritual and political in this world. The existence of “indirect powers,” which Schmitt considers the mortal enemies of the sovereign state, is, in fact, what allows the historical existence of the church as a sovereign and free institution.

Against the imperial cult of the Roman Empire, Peterson identifies the Roman Republic as a superior model of political order because of the possibility of free citizens restraining the religious ambitions of political leaders.<sup>115</sup> This analysis shows a parallel with the emergence of Hitler’s regime out of the deterioration of the political institutions of the Weimar Republic. In the political confrontation against totalitarianism, Peterson

<sup>112</sup>Peterson, “Christ as *Imperator*,” 147.

<sup>113</sup>Nichtweiß, *Erik Peterson*, 804.

<sup>114</sup>John 18:36.

<sup>115</sup>Stoll, *Die Öffentlichkeit der Christus-Krise*, 246

would be more inclined to recognize that a society of free and responsible citizens is closer to a Christian ideal than Schmitt's interpretation of the modern state.<sup>116</sup> Although Peterson makes no direct or systematic statements on the disintegration of the liberal regime of the Weimar Republic, his recognition that Christ and His church are on the opposite side of the totalitarian cult of leadership would suggest that he had some esteem for the achievements of political liberalism as a historical development, not an ideology. However, Peterson remained attached to the old *Reichsidee* as more suitable to the eschatological character of the Christian faith<sup>117</sup> and did not openly recognize liberal democracy as a regime compatible with the "crisis" in the human existence that the Christian revelation brought into the world. In this political regime, the church can freely exercise its public role and can prevent the political order from creating a religious image of itself.

When the state seeks religious devotion and its relationship with the church evolves into open conflict and persecution, the form of combat by the powerless against the powerful is through blood testimony. By witnessing the truth and sacrificing their own lives, as Christ did, the martyrs demonstrate that human conscience is not bound by the will of the sovereign. While Schmitt argues that sovereignty can never be divided, Peterson's martyr exposes a fracture in the idea of sovereignty by defending the freedom and the public place of the church in the community. The act of martyrdom shows that the sovereign can only demand obedience because he has brutal force. However, the use of force against the martyr ends up revealing the sovereign's weakness because, no longer having the monopoly on the representation of truth, he can only impose his will through physical violence. This destroys Schmitt's political theology of sovereignty by showing that the sovereign is no longer the source of the truth. In Peterson's theology of martyrdom, the martyr bears witness to the truth, which is Christ. Thus, it is not the sovereign who decides for the community what the truth is, but rather it is up to every person to respond to the blood testimony of the martyrs.

<sup>116</sup>Ibid., 248.

<sup>117</sup>Erik Peterson, "Politik und Theologie: Der liberale Nationalstaat des 19. Jahrhunderts und die Theologie," in *Offenbarung des Johannes und Politisch-Theologische Texte*, 240.