The Making of the "Theological-Political" in the Crisis of Liberal Democracy

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Call for Papers.

This international conference seeks to examine, from the perspectives of political theory, intellectual history, and the sociology of intellectuals, the relevance of "theological-political" questions for understanding the current crisis of liberal democracy, as well as the responses to that crisis. By "theological-political," we provisionally mean a type of discourse that appeals to a principle constructed as "transcendent" in order to think about the political order, the foundations of authority, and the sources of its legitimacy.

Even today, the notion is closely associated with the German jurist Carl Schmitt, whose genealogy of modern juridico-political concepts, outlined in *Political Theology* (1922), was linked to a counterrevolutionary political project. The aim of this conference is not to revisit the genesis of the concept, its various uses in Schmitt's work, or its many interpretations and appropriations. Rather, it seeks to place the making of the theological-political at the center of analysis, that is, to study the processes through which certain contemporary problems, conflicts, or phenomena are constructed and interpreted as theological-political by different actors.

Since this political framing of religious heritage is itself the product of intellectual, ideological, and political work, contributions may, from historical and sociological perspectives, examine the profiles and trajectories of the actors involved (philosophers, theologians, jurists, religious or activist movements, etc.), the circulation of their ideas, and their connections to political spheres and religious institutions. Beyond mapping contemporary theological-political discourses and their actors, the conference will also investigate, from a more theoretical standpoint, what the theological-political mode of problematization and its conceptual apparatus allow us to identify and think about and, conversely, what they tend to leave in the shadows or even obscure. The goal is to determine whether this perspective genuinely enhances our understanding of contemporary crises and to what extent it may instead obscure their underlying dynamics.

As a primarily heuristic hypothesis, we suggest that three types of contemporary normative theological-political discourses can be distinguished (though they may overlap): authoritarian discourses, democratic discourses, and emancipatory discourses. The conference will be organized around the analysis of these three paradigms:

- **The Authoritarian Paradigm:** This paradigm, associated with Carl Schmitt's concept of political theology, reflects the legitimizing function performed by theological-political discourses. Arguing against liberal democracy, such discourses selectively draw on theological or religious traditions to formulate their critique and propose alternatives, most often taking an ethno-nationalist form that is hostile to minorities and centered on a strong

state. The authoritarian paradigm reflects a particular relationship between theology and politics: faith and the ethical-moral dimension of religion recede into the background in favor of institution and obedience to a transcendent authority. Contributions are invited to examine this relationship as well as contemporary and historical illustrations of the paradigm, such as Catholic post-liberalism in the United States, politically oriented forms of religious radicalism, or the alliance between the Russian state and the Orthodox Church. Proposals may also analyze the conflicts generated by this particular understanding of the theological-political: conflicts between political uses of theology and religious institutions (for example, Carl Schmitt's relationship to the Catholic Church or the controversy between J. D. Vance and Pope Leo XIV), or "secularized" uses of religion (such as far-right identitarian Catholicism or Charles Maurras's "atheist Catholicism"). The study of these tensions should not, however, be limited to Christianity and may also address Hindu nationalism, Islamist movements, the religious-nationalist Zionist movement, and similar cases.

- **The Democratic Paradigm:** Some of the most demanding theories of liberal democracy, from Hans Kelsen to Cécile Laborde, including John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, seek to ground democratic order in the legitimacy of norms and procedures while refraining from defining the common good in substantive terms. This restraint has been challenged by various movements that aim to place "political theology" in the service of a more robust democracy. According to these critiques, liberal democracy struggles to legitimize its institutions and secure the commitment of its members, while remaining dependent on operations of transcendence that it can neither fully acknowledge nor entirely dispense with. Such critiques have led different authors (Charles Taylor, Jürgen Habermas, Hans Joas, Hartmut Rosa, Miguel Vatter, Bruno Karsenti, among others) to reconsider the normative foundations of liberal democracy and, at times, to reinvest certain theological-political resources. Contributions are encouraged to explore whether these responses can redefine, or even renew, the principles of liberal democracy, for example through discussions of a return to forms of civil religion, to the notion of the common good, or of the recognition of religious reasons within the public sphere.

- **The Emancipatory Paradigm:** Here, the appeal to the theological-political is intended less to ground a political order than to make relations of domination visible and contest them. Religious traditions are mobilized as resources for social critique, resistance, memory, and hope. Critical theological-political discourses thus focus particularly on poverty, colonialism, racism, patriarchy, gender-based violence, and ecological destruction. Central questions concern the conditions for genuinely emancipatory speech: who speaks, on whose behalf, and from what position? How can one avoid either postponing justice to an eschatological beyond or, conversely, reducing religious resources to the mere legitimation of a political agenda? Finally, these critical political theologies are often led to subject their own categories to reflexive analysis by decentering the Western and Christian matrix of political theology and opening it to other religious traditions, historical contexts, and experiences of domination, in other words, by "provincializing" it. Relevant examples include Latin American liberation theologies and their circulation, Black political theology, anarchist or anarchistic political theologies, and ecofeminist political theologies.

Submission Guidelines

Within each of these thematic areas, proposals are expected to articulate two levels of analysis:

1) The study of the objects, actors, concepts, and problems specific to the paradigm under consideration;
2) A critical assessment of what their theologico-political treatment illuminates or, conversely, obscures in comparison with other modes of problematization.

Doctoral students and early-career researchers are strongly encouraged to submit proposals.

Conference languages: English and French

Timeline and Submission Procedures

- Proposals (maximum 2,500 characters, including spaces) must be submitted no later than **January 31, 2027**, to: **theologiepolitique@gmail.com**
- Each proposal should be accompanied by a short biographical and bibliographical note on the author.
- Authors will be notified of the outcome by February 15, 2027.