

Political Theology and Teacher Authority: A Trinitarian Alternative?

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In your Poem on Natural Religion you gave us the Catechism of man: give us now, in the one I am suggesting to you, the Catechism of the Citizen.

—Jean-Jacques Rousseau in a letter to Voltaire of August 18, 1756¹

METHOD AND MOTIVATION

There seem to be two general approaches to the method of teaching that philosophy engages in. The first is the one that insists that all terms and concepts be clarified at the outset, in order to understand what is being suggested by their usage in the claims that follow. The other approach assumes a different order. In this approach, terms and concepts can only be clarified by talking about them at some length, in various ways, to eventually distill a set of particular meanings, and the usages those meanings suggest.

I open with these two approaches because although I am sympathetic to the former – which is why I am trying to open by being somewhat clear – I will nonetheless operate on the latter’s assumption that ideas are not made clear by being operationalized within the opening stages of an argument. From this point on, then, I will try to make some sense of teacher authority from past to present, and will even suggest an alternative for the future, using the theoretical lens of political theology. The terms of this discussion will not come with an instruction manual or a neatly packaged, prevailing sense of what those terms are supposed to mean. Instead, I will review a philosophical literature and propose my own ideas as to what may be perceived as a gap in that literature. Much of this approach is not taken for reasons of method, but, rather, because of the speculative nature of theoretical work. Whatever this theoretical work may amount to cannot be foretold in advance, nor would I assume it to be able to be reduced to a single point of significance in relation to teaching, teacher authority, or anything else one might associate with it. What is presently unclear can only be clarified by doing the work itself.

The motivation for the present work stems from the well-known anxiety, in some sense constitutive of our field, regarding the role of the teacher.² The longstanding and well-known traditional vs. progressive debate that we find in the work of John Dewey, and the banking system vs. problem posing pedagogy we find in Paulo Freire, both turn on the role of the teacher and the implications for the teacher’s political authority (or lack thereof) within the classroom and society at large.

But although philosophy of education is preoccupied with the political dimensions of education, the immediate applications of political theology have heretofore been almost wholly neglected within the field. Most discussion of theology (usually under the name of “religion”) in relation to education – as we see in Dewey, but not in Freire – uses the term pejoratively, assuming that a *theological* conception of education is necessarily oppressive or theocratic. Without disputing these claims – as so many of them strike me as being true – this article should show that there is

another, more constructive, way to use a philosophical engagement with theology within philosophy of education, especially when considering questions of teacher authority that are not only constitutive of the field, but also have resurfaced in the work of many contemporary philosophers of education (most notable, in this respect, is Gert Biesta's *The Beautiful Risk of Education*³) concerned about the fading agency and place of the teacher. Anyone familiar with Hannah Arendt's collection of essays that inspired this year's conference theme will find many suggestive overlaps, most of all her repeated investigation into the "crisis of authority" in Western modernity.⁴

This analysis, then, is speculative and experimental, as there are no ready examples of political theology being used as a lens for understanding teacher authority within philosophy of education. The degree to which my claims are true or false is less concerning to me than whether my approach is *plausible*. Merely admitting the plausibility of this literature and perspective to philosophy of education would be, for me, a successful venture. Let us see if that is possible.

PAST

In *Political Theology*, Carl Schmitt describes politics in two ways that are fundamentally theological. The first can be found in his conception of "the sovereign" as "he who decides the exception."⁵ This particular notion of sovereignty is also where we find the most explicit concept of *authority*, which becomes more fully *theological* in the second, retrospective claim: "All significant concepts of modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development ... but also because of their systematic structure..."⁶ This claim sets up a description of the historical place of, and systematic structures related to, "the sovereign" within modernity, which reveal themselves, on Schmitt's analysis, as secularized theological concepts, each corresponding to a distinct understanding of God. The resulting Schmittian progression creates the three simplified analogies: 1) monarchism is compared to monotheism, where the king rules by divine right and analogy; 2) liberalism is compared to deism, where individuals must rule since God does not meddle in human affairs; and 3) socialism is compared to pantheism, where the voice of God is the voice of the people – *vox Dei, vox populi*.⁷

In other words, Schmitt's motion picture of Modernity tells the following story: whereas a conflict between the first and second categories shapes the history of early modernity in the 17th and 18th centuries (this refers to the feud between the monotheism of feudal monarchism and the deism of classical liberalism), in the 18th and 19th centuries a pantheistic socialism emerges that is critical of both the monotheist monarchists and the deistic liberals. Then, in the late 19th and early 20th century, a holy alliance between liberals and socialists vanquishes monarchism; deism and pantheism overtake monotheism forever, creating the hybrid theological formations we find embedded in social democracy, democratic socialism, and even capitalist communism.

What is left in the 20th century, then argues Schmitt, is the theological impossibility for kings or monarchs. Only despots and dictators (such as Hitler), professing a secularized theology (e.g., the Reich of a thousand years), within the liberal/socialist tradition are able to establish autocratic authority, appealing to different theological

narratives of authority. Gone forever is the Platonic ruler, the Hellenic precursor to the Judeo-Christian God-King.⁸ On this view, problems and solutions related to an overly authoritarian state in the 21st century cannot follow directly from the now discarded monotheistic theology of monarchial sovereignty. A more imaginative and subtle consideration of present and future is required.⁹

Schmitt's political theology is featured in Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer*, in which Agamben draws heavily from Schmitt's descriptive account of sovereignty, what Agamben calls the "paradox of sovereignty."¹⁰ Agamben uses Schmitt selectively, however. Agamben's consideration of the historical and systematic implications for his notion of sovereignty is not approached through a Schmittian lens; only "the sovereign" is taken from Schmitt. For the historical and systematic reading, Agamben relies on Foucault's *History of Sexuality* and its seemingly complimentary notion of *vitae necisque potestas*.¹¹ Agamben operationalizes the Schmittian emphasis on "the exception" to incorporate into his notion of "the law," and theorizes the evolution of the *homo sacer* – the sacred and therefore exceptional man from Roman law (i.e., in the sense of its relation to the sovereign who decides the exception and suspends the law) – in terms of the juridical structure of "the camp,"¹² a macabre reference to the concentration camp as the "biopolitical paradigm of the modern."¹³

My reading of Agamben's mix-and-match line of reasoning in *Homo Sacer* is that it is too selective and arbitrary, resulting in a rather detached and immaterial conception of "the camp." Unlike Schmitt's historical analysis (in the taxonomy laid out previously), Agamben-via-Foucault does not account for the constitution and contestation of the temporal site of the camp and, by implication, the theological articulation of sovereignty within modernity. I would claim that we can only understand Agamben's description of "the camp as the *nomos* of modernity,"¹⁴ when we understand the political theology that makes the concentration camp possible within modernity, which requires not only Schmitt's notion of sovereignty, but also his historical and systematic analysis of the political theology of modernity. For Schmitt, unlike Agamben, the camp could only be the *nomos* of modernity when it is understood in its historical manifestation (i.e., after the demise of monotheistic monarchism) and systematic relationships (i.e., after the systematic synthesis of deistic liberalism and pantheistic socialism).¹⁵

In fact, partly because of Agamben's selective approach, moving from Schmitt to Foucault, we also find significant distance between Schmitt's original notion of *nomos* and Agamben's usage of the term. Whereas Schmitt's sense of *nomos* – on grand display in his book *The Nomos of the Earth*¹⁶ – is primarily a question of order and spatiality (following closely a Hellenic understanding of economy [οἰκονομία¹⁷]), Agamben's sense follows Foucault more closely, becoming genealogical and paradigmatic (almost Kuhnian in this respect). This has been a widely critiqued aspect of Agamben's treatment of "the camp" as a structure or paradigm rather than a thing within history, but I am not concerned with *that* particular critique except to use it to clarify my own approach.¹⁸

My suggestion here is to try and understand the Schmittian theological order of the spatiality of Agamben's camp as a dark way to envision the classroom, because it

is *nomos* that provides the order and orientation within which the question of teacher authority emerges within a state-sponsored compulsory school. But, returning to Schmitt's historical progression of political theology within modernity, we also see a perhaps more recognizable pattern that provides a more direct route to the classroom. There is an almost instant analogy to be made between the monotheistic, deistic, and pantheistic theological conceptions of political authority, and the progression of conceptions of teacher authority. From traditional to progressive and then to critical pedagogy, there is a striking similar progression: first, the entry of the nation-state within modernity and then the state-sponsored national institution of the school and its own unique understandings of the authority of the teacher. On this analogical progression, in terms of Schmitt's political theology, traditional pedagogy would operate as monotheistic, progressivism would be deistic, and critical would be pantheistic.

At this point, however, we might pause and look a bit further into the role of political theology within the present landscape of state authority before speculating on emerging thoughts on a theory of teacher authority for the future. As mentioned in the introduction, clarity may come, but only in the speculative process itself. Plausibility remains my only objective.

PRESENT

Having noted the weakness of Agamben's departure from Schmitt's political theology in *Homo Sacer*, we might pick up the thread again in a different site, one that extends and slightly reframes the Schmittian progression out of the 20th and into the 21st century.

In *God is in Pain*, Slavoj Žižek and Boris Gunjević pen a Central European retrospective about the failures of the Left – read: the failure of communism – in recent modern history. They understand this failure as, among other things, an inability for Soviet communism to account for the theological; or, to be more precise in connection to Schmitt, the failure to account, as Nietzsche did, for the political demise of monarchy and monotheism, i.e. the political death of God. Gunjević begins the discussion by discussing Lenin's failure to understand the “mystagogy of revolution”¹⁹ embedded in the proletariat's call for the *eternal* reign of worker and peasants.²⁰ This theological blindness, on his view, captures the failure of the revolution itself and leads Gunjević to consider the implications of Radical Orthodoxy²¹ for a new revolution, capable of bringing about the demise of capitalism.²²

Žižek's route into the discussion begins with a form of atheistic apologetics in which he directly engages the visceral core of the aforementioned “*nomos* of the camp” in relation to the “theological significance of the Shoah.” His main claim is as follows:

Therein lies the theological significance of the Shoah: although it is usually conceived as the ultimate challenge to theology (if there is a God and if he is good, how could he have allowed such a horror to take place?), it is at the same time only theology that can provide the frame enabling us to somehow approach the scope of the catastrophe – the fiasco of God is still the fiasco of *God*.²³

This quote can be used to point out the gap between Agamben's use of Schmittian sovereignty, and his shift away from Schmitt's political theology towards Fou-

cauldian genealogy. And it is here that I want to focus my critique of Agamben, in the theological break where here leaves Schmitt behind and, if Žižek and Gunjević are right (and I think they are), succumbs to a quintessential mistake of the Left: the mistake of theological illiteracy. In this arbitrary space, we find the absence of Schmitt's *theological* consideration of history – i.e., his chronological taxonomy of monotheism, deism, and pantheism – and hence Agamben's analysis falls into a naive theological instrumentalism and the equally strategic dismissal of theology through the horror of the Shoah.

Facing the violence of the past century, largely a result of unwitting theological illiteracy as opposed to the theocratic crusades of the past, could it be even remotely true that the contested and vexing question of teacher authority – itself a question of sovereignty – might also become lost in Agamben's Foucauldian reading of the objectification of the subject into bare life as *homo sacer*? It seems clear that Agamben himself secularizes the sacred, not through the profane – itself a form of sacrifice that maintains its place as sacred – but through the law. Agamben is thoroughly juridical. It is no wonder, then, that his appeal to Foucauldian biopolitics cannot fully account for “the camp as the *nomos* of modernity” without subsequently deluding the “*nomos*” of *nomos*. In other words, Agamben's Foucauldian approach fails to understand the theological structure of *nomos* – the economic relationship between order and place – that produces *nomos* itself.

In a similar way, the teacher, the rabbinic professing *magister*, has been placed under Agamben's Foucauldian spectre of the law through neoliberal educational policies and is often displaced through a suspension of the law in extreme, but not rare, cases of school shootings and police brutality. As I have suggested, however, this placement is not displaced by the law pure and simple: *nomos* itself transacts between order and spatiality within history. Until the theological and, therefore, historical *nomos* of the law itself has been accounted for, as fully as possible, we cannot make any sense whatsoever of proletariats holding signs of the eternal reign of workers and peasants, or the perverse possibility of the Shoah, the gulag, and the camp of the classroom, where children attend under the state's sovereign authority and are tragically sacrificed in cases that refuse, in the United States, to be treated as exceptions by the law, or those that even openly collude between Church and State, such as Canadian residential schools. In other words, the question of teacher authority is not available in Agamben's *homo sacer* because Agamben's notion of sacredness is juridical, not theological, and thereby lacks the transcendence to deal with the temporal *nomos* of modernity.

With Schmitt, however, we find a path where the authority of the teacher exists within the *nomos* of a theological conception of history, and that understands, perhaps even more morbidly, that the only teacher with sovereignty, the monotheistic teacher, has been killed under the combined reign of liberal/progressive and socialist/critical theologies. So, the now bureaucratic and managerial constructivisms of teaching, and its neo-Marxist and postcolonial activisms, are incapable of a political theology that does not demand either a return to the monotheism of the past or a complacent ideological blindness to the soft violence of combined liberal/deist and socialist/

pantheistic pedagogy. Agamben's provocative critique lacks what the secular Left has always lacked: an alternative theo-political imagination. Of course, many on the Right, including Carl Schmitt, have seen this lack as a nostalgic opportunity for conservatism. We need not settle for either, however. The future demands something as old as political theology and as new as the untried trialectics of the Trinity.

FUTURE

Although Schmitt's original theory is lacking in a variety of ways, by distinguishing him from Agamben we can see that Schmitt is not lacking a theological historical imagination to the same degree that Agamben is in his instrumental use of Schmitt. Schmitt's understanding of monotheism, however, is itself incomplete and theologically unsophisticated, too wedded to a purely political reading of history. In this regard, Schmitt's political theology is too political in the same way that Agamben's is too juridical. Schmitt has a rather Davidic, pre-Christian, sense of monotheism, which lends itself well to Agamben's rather Mozaic juridical obsessions. In fact, Schmitt's own theological account fails for the same reason as Agamben's failure to acknowledge it: Schmitt, too, misses the truly mystical element, the Trinity. The same is true when we look to the most recent theological argument within philosophy of education, by Gert Biesta in *The Beautiful Risk of Education*. Biesta uses the theological work of John Caputo to channel the Judaic thought of Emmanuel Levinas, yet the exegetical effort remains in the Genesis account of the Old Testament. This is surely a monotheism of the same sort as Schmitt's. But where in these theological accounts does one place a God who is one in three and three in one? Where do we find neither a monistic nor a dualistic ontology? And how does one account for the tremendous difference between the actual theological question of the sovereign between the Trinitarian theologies of the East and West – the *filioque*, the key source of the Great Schism of 1054, a historical change that directly contributed to the *nomos* of the very idea of the “West” (that remains mostly ignored by the cheap memory of an academy that skips over a millennia of history from the Early Church through the Middle Ages)?

This most difficult theological case of the Trinity is absent in Schmitt and, perhaps, to join the ranks of Žižek and Gunjević, it is this very absence that bears great hope for the future of the 21st century. Despite the political death of God at the end of the 19th century, the death that killed kings and autocratic teachers forever, there may still be a theology so radical it cannot be imagined as possible in the past or present: the return of Christianity under a new form of theological sovereignty. A Trinitarian politics. A rejection, or perhaps a synthetic trialectic not born of Hegel of the political theologies that created the secular concepts not only of the authority of the state, but also the compulsory school and its teachers.

Whereas Žižek and others within theological Marxism understand political theology in terms of its use to dialectically oppose capitalism (and this is of course rooted in a different neo-Hegelian trinitarianism), I see it as a way to recover the teacher that we have perhaps never had. The teacher that is the object of frustration at the root of the century-old debates about pedagogy that grew out of even older political conflicts within modernity. Perhaps this is the teacher that Biesta has begun

to imagine as possible when he suggests that we “make some room for transcendence.”²⁴ But making some room for transcendence is about as sensible as making room for a tsunami or preparing in any real sense for the radical fiction of the real future. It is perhaps worth offering a final suggestion for a more careful consideration of the Trinity as a plausible source of philosophical insight, with implications for a new, untested political theology with an altogether different corresponding sense of authority. Otherwise, we risk backing into the end of history, with only fatalism and nostalgia as live options, with a conception of the teacher that either attempts to resurrect a long dead God, or that unwittingly reforms and secularizes another theological ritual of authority, unaware of the *nomos* of the camp that followed 19th century decide. Both options are ripe for ideology and neither has offered much in terms of a viable future. Indeed, the very language of *reform* in education unknowingly harkens to the Protestant legacy that preceded the theo-political revolutions of the 17th century Protestant Reformation.

In a present that seems increasingly to be either an apocalypse or the real future – especially within a field that seems to have lost its faith in teaching or perhaps has lost its ability to imagine what a teacher with authority might be – in this era of neoliberalism that itself has not been properly understood theologically, where the economic *nomos* has reached the plastic ideology of the credit card, in this present future where the resentment of modernity’s inability to deliver its utopian promises of Enlightenment – where science has healed disease but also colludes with a global military industrial complex, where psychology offers pills and therapy to soothe our day to day, but aids regimes of torture, where the IBM of the camp is now making a smarter planet, in this time when we need to be taught again and again a lesson we cannot plan or expect, perhaps now it is time to see what theological riddles, what mythopoeic lessons, might be stored in a transition from pedagogy to mystagogy, from a purely strategic room for transcendence in teaching, to a radical fidelity to the teacher who dwells both near and far, and in the distance between.

This Trinitarian alternative is not without its dangers, but the other alternatives are perhaps only dangerous and nothing more. To return teaching to its rightful place in the commons of life, the communion of persons in the image of God we find in the *mysterium tremendum* of Christianity may indeed be a source that still survives, untouched by modern political theology in the progression of historical and structural eras, bearing a plausible theory of sovereignty in which the sovereign exists as the exception itself that offers no exceptions from without. This return, however, cannot long for the past, only for the future.

These are but opening and frail suggestions for our present, which may contain the makings of a radical future.

1. As cited by Simon Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology* (London and Brooklyn: Verso, 2012).

2. Though I will not be addressing them in this article, for reasons that should become fairly obvious, it is worth noting two philosophical books on teacher authority, which stand in stark contradiction to each other: Charles Bingham, *Authority is Relational: Rethinking Educational Empowerment* (Albany, NY:

SUNY Press, 2009) and, more recently, William H. Kitchen, *Authority and the Teacher* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

3. Gert Biesta, *The Beautiful Risk of Education* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

4. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Classic, 2006).

5. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 5.

6. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36. This is a well-known and often cited quote on political theology (one might even call it trendy), however, few cite it at the length I have here to show the Schmittian relation between secularization and the historical and systematic structure, which motivates my particular reading of *Political Theology*.

7. In case the reader suspects that my taxonomy here is too loose, it corresponds closely to (although it does not derive from) Simon Critchley's reading of Schmitt in the opening of the third chapter ("Mystical Anarchism," 103-117) of his recent book on political theology: Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*.

8. The Hellenic influence upon Judaism and Early Christianity (including Rome) is just outside the realm of relevance for this article. The best sources for these points, of course, are Plato's *Republic* and the first book of Samuel of the *Bible*, on the election of Saul as King of Israel.

9. Schmitt's political theology differs here from liberation theologians such as Gustavo Gutierrez who, citing Johannes B. Metz, writes about the "new political theology" as something that takes for granted a certain degree of post-Enlightenment secularism, that in the other direction chastens a purely individualistic sense of religion from preventing Christians from seeing the gospel as having secular social demands, such as the preferential option for the poor. See Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 126-130.

10. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 15.

11. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 87.

12. *Ibid.*, Part Three, 119-188.

13. *Ibid.*, 117.

14. *Ibid.*, 166-180.

15. It should be clear at this point that while I am not overtly relying on Hannah Arendt's Augustinian notion of evil, I am certainly gesturing in that general direction through Schmitt. Also, the reality of Schmitt's personal sympathies with Nazism only make this point all the more plain and stark and, ultimately, tragic.

16. Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of Jus Publicum Europaeum*, trans. J. L. Ulmen (New York: Telos Press, 2006).

17. For more on the Greek concept of economy see Alexander M. Sidorkin, "Idolaters, Iconoclasts, and Iconophiles: The Productive Ideal and Philosophy of Education," in *Philosophy of Education 2013*, ed. Cris Mayo (Urbana-Champaign: Philosophy of Education Society, 2013), 302-310.

18. See: Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

19. Slavoj Žižek and Boris Gunjević, *God is in Pain: Inversions of the Apocalypse* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2012), 7-26.

20. Žižek and Gunjević, *God is in Pain*, 9-14.

21. Radical Orthodoxy is relevant here for contextual reasons: it was a theme of Žižek's previous book-length discussion with John Milbank, founder of the Radical Orthodoxy movement, a point that there is no space to go into in any depth.

22. Žižek and Gunjević, *God is in Pain*, 193-220.

23. Žižek and Gunjević, *God is in Pain*, 158.

24. Gert Biesta, "Transcendence, Revelation, and the Constructivist Classroom: Or, In Praise of Teaching," *Philosophy of Education 2011*, ed. Robert Kunzman (Urbana-Champaign: Philosophy of Education Society, 2011), 358-365.