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Political theology and religious pluralism: Rethinking liberalism in times of post-secular emancipation

*Abstract* Recent debates in liberal political theory have sought to come to terms with the post-secular condition, characterised by deep religious pluralism, the resurgence of right-wing populism, as well as new social movements for economic, ecological and racial justice. These forces represent competing claims on the public space and create challenges for the liberal model of state neutrality. To better grasp this problem, I argue for a more comprehensive engagement between liberalism and political theology, by which I understand a mode of theorising that reveals the theological basis of modern secular political concepts. In considering two contrasting approaches to political or public theology – Carl Schmitt’s and Jürgen Moltmann’s – I argue that liberal political theory can and should open itself to a diversity of social movements and ecological struggles that pluralise the political space in ways that unsettle the boundary between the secular and religious.

Recent debates in liberal political theory have sought to come to terms with what Habermas (2008, 17-29) announced some time ago as the post-secular society. According to Habermas, post-secular societies had to take account of the ‘return of religion’ to the public space, a phenomenon that presented unique challenges to the liberal model of state neutrality, public reason and democratic will formation. Similarly, Rawls (2005) sought to accommodate deep religious pluralism within the liberal polity: rather than a simple *modus vivendi* between irreconcilable perspectives and sensibilities, he proposed the idea of an overlapping consensus between reasonable doctrines. Both thinkers recognised the need to move beyond a strictly secularist model that excluded religion from the public space. It was no longer expected, in other words, that religious people should leave their beliefs at the door when they entered the public sphere. Along with secularists, atheists and those with deeply held non-religious convictions, they had a right to political participation and democratic deliberation, as long as they were able to translate their views in terms that all reasonable and rational people, believers and non-believers alike, might

understand and agree to. However, this seemingly plausible solution to problem of religious pluralism threw up more questions than it answered, and subsequent debates in liberal political theory have wrestled with questions surrounding the meaning of state neutrality, the terms and limits of liberal tolerance, the extent to which religious differences and claims might be accommodated, and whether indeed the state has the sovereign right to determine these matters in the first place (see Laborde and Bardon 2017).

Yet, what is generally absent in such debates, and what I believe might give us greater clarity on some of these issues, is an engagement with political theology.<sup>1</sup> This is perhaps not surprising given that 'political theology' is a somewhat polymorphous term, referring to a diverse range of debates about the relationship between the theological and the political. Political theology spans a whole series of discussions in political theory, continental philosophy and theology about the theological origins and underpinnings of modern political institutions, the role of theology in contemporary political discourse, arcane debates in twentieth century German legal theory and the philosophy of religion, historical studies of medieval and early modern conceptions of sovereignty, and investigations into the politico-theological controversies in Christianity, Judaism and Islam, along with other religions.<sup>2</sup> There is political theology done by theologians and religious scholars, and there is political theology done by political theorists – and often what seems like a resounding non--dialogue between them.<sup>3</sup>

Notwithstanding the difficulties of definition, I contend that political theology has something important to say not only about the post-secular condition, but about question of religious pluralism in liberal societies. I understand political theology as a distinct mode of political theorising that draws attention to the way theological categories underpin and structure – in some ways explicitly, in other ways obliquely - the political institutions, discourses and norms of secular modernity. Taken in this sense, the question of whether we live in secular or post-secular societies is already answered by political theology: the post-secular is symptomatic of, and contingent upon, the secular and is therefore immanent within it – just as, one could say, the secular condition itself is premised upon the theological world it incorporated and replaced (see Löwith 1949; see also Milbank 1990; Asad 2003; Taylor 2007).

Therefore, to speak of the post-secular, or of the 'return of religion' to the public space, is to presuppose the secular; it is to make visible what was already integrated into the structures of modern secularism. Political theology, as a mode of analysis, makes this theological trace explicit and explores its implications for the way we think about politics today. It thus allows us to gain deeper insights into the controversy in liberal political thought regarding the tensions between religious claims on the public space and the idea, basic to liberal theory, of a secular state formally committed to religious neutrality and, indeed, to neutrality with regards to all competing perspectives on the good.

However, one of the problems with political theology is that it is generally beholden to the thought of Carl Schmitt, whose sovereign-centric and absolutist model of politics is inhospitable to pluralism. In this paper I construct an alternative account of political theology to which pluralism is central. By pluralism, I understand more than simply a diversity of views, perspectives and identities that can be accommodated within a liberal political framework – although this is important too - but rather what political theorist William E. Connolly refers to as 'deep pluralism' (see 1995, 2005) defined by a generous ethos of engagement and respect between different perspectives and sensibilities, something that recognises the porosity and contingency of all identities. Here, it seems to me, a sufficiently pluralised – as opposed to orthodox or fundamentalist - religious sensibility might have an important role to play redefining political identities, institutions and discourses in ways that are neither entirely religious nor entirely secular (see Griffin 2005).

However, I also argue that this renewal of pluralism in the post-secular age demands a rethinking of certain elements of liberalism. Here I draw on the thinking of Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann, whose alternative approach to political theology is resistant to state power and seeks an independent critical voice for the Church, one that is in solidarity with emancipatory social movements and liberation struggles, particularly around social and environmental justice. Moltmann's version of political theology aligns with recent approaches in 'public theology' which advocate a more prominent role for churches and religious groups in progressive politics (see Moltmann 1999; see also Breitenberg 2003; Graham 2013; Kim and Day 2017). My claim here is that this more radical articulation of political theology not only contrasts

sharply with Schmitt's conservative and sovereign-centric model, but also embodies a 'deeper' form of pluralism that goes beyond the limits of liberal theory, blurring the line between secular and non-secular modes of political experience.

The argument presented here proceeds in four stages. Firstly, I set out the broad significance of a politico-theological analysis for liberal political theory, exploring the question of the religious determination of liberalism itself, and whether or not its theological origins undermine its formal commitments to religious neutrality. Rather, I contend that the real issue that arises from political theology is that of legitimacy, something that the liberal political order is currently experiencing an acute crisis of. The second part of the paper explores Carl Schmitt's sovereign-centric version of political theology and his critique of liberalism and pluralism. Liberal political theory, I argue, cannot avoid an encounter with Schmitt; yet, at the same time, Schmitt's thinking remains fundamentally hostile and antithetical to its core normative commitments. In the third section, I explore the diversity of more recent approaches to political theology which depart radically from Schmitt's version and which are, I suggest, more compatible with liberalism, while at the same time pluralising the political field in ways that disturb the lines between the secular and religious. Here, radical political theology and eco-political theology are important examples of new ways of thinking about the entanglements of theology with secular and emancipatory political movements and struggles, particularly around climate change. In the final part of the paper, I focus on Jürgen Moltmann's alternative account of political theology. In Moltmann's support for human rights and federal political structures, there is much common ground to be had with liberalism. Yet, I also show how his 'intersectional' understanding of rights – one that importantly takes into account the rights of nature – along with his idea that the church has a public role to play in resisting oppression, contributes towards a deepening of liberal pluralism in ways that better reflect the post-secular condition.

Is liberalism a political religion?

One of the questions that arises in any possible encounter between political theology and liberal political thought is whether liberalism is itself a religion, what we might call a political religion.<sup>4</sup> In other words, does liberalism - as a political doctrine, a set of ideas, norms and institutional rationalities - take on the role of a secular or public

religion in contemporary societies? Do its early origins in the Protestant Reformation, in the religious conflicts of the sixteenth century, or in the early modern ideas of religious toleration, which were themselves grounded in theology, give it a kind of theological determination today? And if so, should this matter? Does it undermine liberalism's claims to neutrality and public reason, or its normative commitments to equality and individual rights? The suggestion here is not that the theological roots of modern liberalism mean that it remains somehow a distinctly Christian, even Protestant, doctrine blind to its own biases and structurally intolerant towards other religious viewpoints and discourses (see Asad 2003; and Mahmood 2005). Here I think liberals can defend themselves against the critique that liberalism privileges certain religions and belief-based religious life over those (non-Christian) religions grounded in tradition and embedded practices and rituals (see Laborde 2017, 32-36; and 2008).

Instead, a politico-theological analysis of liberal state neutrality throws up a somewhat different set of issues and concerns about the way that the modern state takes on a sacred dimension once occupied by religious authority prior to the collapse of the theological world in the sixteenth century. Of course, we must distinguish here between the theological and the sacred: Christian theology was, and continues to be, at times at odds with the religious (and political) authority of the church and with religious practices and institutions that are deemed sacred. Yet my point is that the emergence of secularism and ideas of religious toleration in modernity is really the story of the absorption and integration of religious authority within the structures of the sovereign state. The sovereign state takes over from the church as the sacred body – the *corpus mysticum* - which gives shape and symbolic consistency to society. One can see this logic of absorption quite clearly in Hobbes when he refers to Leviathan as the 'mortal God' and when he attributes to the secular sovereign the ultimate right to determine religious controversies, while at the same time allowing a certain private freedom of faith. Of course, liberalism as an ideology seeks to regulate and limit sovereign power, and the ambiguous relationship between liberalism and sovereignty, as we shall see below, becomes one of the central questions for political theology to deal with (see Kahn 2011). However, in modernity, in Western societies at least, liberalism has become a political culture (see Schmitt 2007) and secular governing rationality through which

this sacred power of sovereignty is articulated. Its defining norms and principles, such as the rule of law, formal equality and respect for individual rights, become as much the legitimating discourses of sovereign state power as they impose limitations upon it. So when the liberal state seeks to mediate religious conflicts, when it decides on matters of religious freedom, toleration and accommodation, when, in short, it determines the boundaries of the secular public space, it does so with a symbolic authority that has its foundations in theology and which continues to bear its legacy and imprint. A politico-theological reading of the liberal state is a way of thinking about its legitimacy in secular modernity; of what gives it the legitimate authority to determine the appropriate boundaries between religion and the public space.

Now, one might wonder why any of this matters, why the theological genealogy of the modern liberal state necessarily problematises liberalism as a philosophy. However, if, as I have suggested, we understand political theology as being concerned with the question of political legitimacy, then we are left with a real problem today: contemporary liberalism is experiencing its own crisis of legitimation. Here I am referring not only to increasingly intense conflicts between different faiths, or to the increasingly contested boundaries of the secular public space. We could also point to the populist challenge to liberal norms and principles such as egalitarianism, individual rights, the rule of law, and religious neutrality. Populists, at least those of the right-wing, nationalist, identitarian stripe, adopt an exclusionary view of citizenship and access to the public space based on a narrow conception of the nation, often defined in terms of a certain ethno-cultural-religious (Christian) identity that they see as threatened by immigration and multiculturalism. Religious conflict and the populist challenge represent different aspects of the crisis of legitimacy that liberal politics is currently undergoing. Moreover, they might be seen as expressions of a form of political theology in the sense that they revolve around the problem of sovereignty and what it means today: should the secular state become a theocratic state, should it derive its authority more explicitly from religious sources, as, for instance, Christian fundamentalists in the United States would argue; should the secular state be more explicitly aligned to national identity and interests, which are placed above international obligations; should sovereignty, highjacked by liberal elites and global interests, be restored to the people and

become the direct expression of its will, as populists demand?<sup>5</sup> Here democratic sovereignty and legitimacy take on an entirely different meaning to that proposed by liberal constitutionalists and deliberative proceduralists. Indeed, what we seem to be witnessing today is the coming apart of liberalism and sovereignty, and the emergence of a new, authoritarian 'post-liberal' political paradigm which presents serious challenges to liberalism. Thinking about these challenges through the prism of political theology can give us greater insight into their origins, as well guide a response.

### Carl Schmitt's challenge to liberalism

Of course, any discussion of political theology and its implications for liberal political theory cannot avoid an encounter with Carl Schmitt, the conservative German Weimar era legal theorist and later Nazi jurist with whom, at least in modern debates, the term political theology is inevitably associated. In his 1922 work, *Politische Theologie*, Schmitt makes two key points about sovereignty. The first can be summed up in the oft-quoted line, 'Sovereign is he who decides on the exception' (Schmitt 2005, 5). For Schmitt, the defining feature of sovereignty, what is really at its core, is the unilateral authority to decide on exceptional situations, on what we might call 'states of emergency'. Here the sovereign has the ultimate authority to decide not only what measures to take – up to and including suspending the normal legal order – but what actually constitutes an exceptional situation, that is, an existential threat to the state, in the first place. This 'exceptional' authority of sovereignty is in a paradoxical relationship to the juridical norms that define the legal order: in suspending the rule of law, the moment of the exception exceeds the legal norm, but it is also what, in the 'last instance', grounds and secures these legal norms and gives them their authority. This idea of the exception is part of Schmitt's critique of liberal constitutionalism and of neo-Kantian legal theorists like Hans Kelsen, who sought to rule out the exception in jurisprudence by understanding law as a self-contained, self-referential series of norms with nothing outside it. In a similar way, liberal political theorists would seek to rule out the exceptional decision through procedural norms and constitutional principles designed to limit and regulate political power. However, for Schmitt, the problem with these approaches was that they failed to recognise that legal norms and rules actually presuppose an exterior



authority that determines when and how a rule is applied in specific situations, thus giving concrete expression to the rule through its transgression. Schmitt therefore asserts the pre-eminence and superiority of the exception over the rule (2005, 15). It is difficult to see this in any other terms than as a juridical defence of the principle of sovereign absolutism that can violate the rule of law in the very name of upholding it.

The second key aspect of Schmitt's argument about political theology is as follows: 'All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts...' (2005, 36). This is Schmitt's take on secularism: modern political concepts, such as state sovereignty and the aforementioned state of exception, are really a secular translation of theological concepts. There is a structural parallel between the absolute authority of God over the universe and the absolute authority of the sovereign over society; and the state of exception – in which the legal constitution is suspended by the sovereign's decision – is similar to God's miracle that suspends the laws of nature. In pointing to these structural analogies, Schmitt is not so much reflecting on the persistence of religion in politics but, rather, highlighting a place of transcendence left vacant by religion in the modern era. Thus, state sovereignty comes to fill the void once occupied by religious authority (Newman 2019).

However, Schmitt is doing more here than simply revealing the theological underpinnings of modern secular politics. He is once again defending the principle of absolute sovereignty, which he believes should exist in a transcendent relationship to society, just as God transcended the natural order. The problem was that in modernity, under the combined pressures of secularism, atheism, technology, bourgeois economics, philosophies of immanence and, above all, liberalism, this necessarily transcendent, sacred dimension of sovereignty had been eclipsed. The state had been turned into an 'administrative machine' entirely at the service of the economy and subordinate to the liberal preoccupation with 'culture', parliamentary procedure and the rule of law. The modern secular liberal age was therefore the age of political neutralisation (Schmitt 2007, 80-96). It is hard not to hear echoes of this critique in the contemporary populist attack on the liberal 'administrative' state. Indeed, Schmitt's political theology can be seen as a response to an earlier legitimisation crisis of the Weimar liberal state.

For Schmitt, liberalism is an anti-politics in which the sanctity of the sovereign decision is drowned out by rules, laws, procedures and interminable debate and

deliberation. Liberal institutions, in Schmitt's eyes, were nothing but debating chambers in which the decision is endlessly deferred. Moreover, in denying what Schmitt saw as the basic anthropological (and we could say *theological*) truth of any genuine political theory – the inherent evil of man – liberalism could not be considered as political at all. Rather, according to Schmitt (2007, 71) it was a set of ethical norms, a culture of individualism and a theory of economics.

Liberalism, for Schmitt, is therefore an evasion of the political. It avoids what is central to the political dimension - the relationship of enmity that allows a political identity or community to be constituted in opposition to the other who is seen to pose an existential threat to it. For Schmitt, the friend/enemy opposition is at the heart of the political relationship: the intensity of this opposition is what raises all relationships in society to the 'dignity' of the political. Indeed, it is the possibility that one might go to war with the other, that one might be prepared to kill one's enemy, that turns the normal differences and oppositions one finds in society into genuinely political relationships. According to Schmitt, liberalism seeks to avoid this reality by sublimating enmity into either economic competition, or into disagreements that can be resolved rationally through debate and dialogue and without violence.

The idea of enmity is a useful way of testing liberalism's capacity to recognise and negotiate religious differences. Under normal circumstances, and indeed when viewed from the perspective of liberalism, religion is non-political: it is a matter of private belief and consigned to the realm of civil society as opposed to the public realm of the state. Liberalism, with its neutral institutions and principles of toleration, does its best to depoliticise and privatise religion. However, when these structures break down, when religious conflicts intensify, they go from being religious to *political* conflicts (Schmitt 2007, 37). Schmitt is drawing attention to what he sees as the inevitable dimension of conflict and opposition through which all communities, including religious communities, are constituted. Moreover, when the state seeks to mediate religious differences, to eliminate the threat of religious conflict, it can only do so by transcending society and establishing an absolute and decisive sovereignty over it. Yet, behind this image of secular state neutrality is a theologically charged political community, unified through a shared enmity towards the other, the outsider,

as well as through absolute loyalty and obedience to the sovereign (see Meier 1998, 76).

What Schmitt's political theology is really averse to is pluralism. The sovereign state must be the single, transcendent authority in society, the unilateral decider of the borders and boundaries of the political community. Schmitt is therefore critical not only of liberalism's acceptance of, indeed commitment to, a certain pluralism of views and perspectives in society, but also of pluralist theories of the state, which see the state as one association amongst many in society and as having no greater claim on our loyalty than other associations we may belong to. While this particular understanding of pluralism is a matter of some controversy in liberal political theory - particularly on the question of whether the liberal commitment to state neutrality means the state has no legitimate jurisdiction over different religious communities<sup>6</sup> - the recognition of different and, at times, competing claims to our allegiance and sense of belonging and identity, whether religious, cultural or whatever, is an important aspect of contemporary liberal theory. Here Schmitt turns his attention to English pluralists and liberal socialists like Harold Laski and G.D.H Cole, who pointed to the way that the individual in modern societies lived simultaneously in different worlds, being members of multiple associations and groups at any one time, whether they be a church, labour union, family or sports club. When there was a conflict of loyalties between these groups, the situation could only be decided on a case by case basis. In Schmitt's eyes, this view of social relations represented an unacceptable challenge to the sovereignty of the state, which should claim our ultimate loyalty, above and beyond the other associations we may be part of. But, more so, this form of state pluralism represented a disavowal of the political, according to Schmitt: once again, it evades the question of who ultimately decides on conflicts between different associations. Political theology, at least on Schmitt's reading, means not that the religious but the *political* is a special case, that it has a special status compared to other spheres in society and that, as such, it has a unique claim on our loyalty. It is therefore incompatible with pluralism (Schmitt 2007, 45).

I have explored the main dimensions of Schmitt's political theology and its implications for liberalism. In understanding political theology as the secularisation of

the theological into political terms, Schmitt sought to create a new kind of political religion of absolute state sovereignty, one that was fundamentally hostile to liberalism. What should liberals take from Schmitt's thesis? Is there anything here that could be redeemed and usefully deployed by liberals in addressing the problem of religious pluralism in post-secular societies? While Schmitt's political theology might be a good diagnostic tool for revealing the theological behind the secular, it carries with it the baggage of authoritarianism and absolutism – one could say a kind of political monotheism (see Gourgouris 2016) – that is irreconcilable with liberalism's commitment to toleration and the recognition of pluralism, to say nothing of its other commitments to individual rights and constitutionalism. If liberalism seeks legitimacy, it is difficult to say why Schmitt's authoritarian notion of the sovereign decision, or his politics of enmity, offers a more appealing or effective ground than public reason and deliberation.

This notwithstanding, my view here is that liberal political theory cannot simply shut itself off from the questions raised by political theology. It must take account of the inextricable relationship between theology and politics that characterises secular and post-secular societies. Moreover, liberal theory can draw on theological modes of thinking about politics as a way of responding to some of the challenges it faces. My aim here is to not develop a distinct liberal political theology, but to show how an alternative rendering of political theology can yield conceptual resources that are more compatible with liberal norms and principles, and thus contribute towards a new framework of political legitimacy in a post-secular age.

### Pluralising political theology

We should bear in mind that Schmitt's version of political theology, while influential, especially in contemporary reflections on the limitations of liberalism (see Kahn 2011; Mouffe 2009) is, at the same time, highly singular and contested. Even in Schmitt's time, debates in German intellectual circles in the fields of political philosophy (see Strauss 2007), the history and philosophy of religion (see Blumenberg 1985), and theology cast major doubt on the coherence of his political theology. Perhaps most significantly, the theologian Erik Peterson (2011) questioned the theological basis for Schmitt's monotheistic account of sovereignty, arguing that

it was incompatible with the Christian Trinitarian doctrine, accusing Schmitt of a kind of political paganism.

More recently, as the field of political theology has become broader and more diversified, new and more emancipatory approaches have emerged, building on radical theological movements in the 1960s and 1970s, such as 'liberation theology' (see Metz 1998; and Gutiérrez 1998). These approaches have sought to rethink Christian theology to bring it into line with the increasingly secular orientation of Western societies. Indeed, continental philosopher Gianni Vattimo has argued that the destiny of Christianity *is* secularism, and that once it has been stripped of doctrinal orthodoxy and its reliance on church authority, what is left of Christianity is its message of love, charity and tolerance. God thus performs his own *kenosis*, emptying himself of his sovereignty and leaving the world entirely to us to determine. In this account, the secularisation of Christian theology leads to very different conclusions to those drawn by Schmitt: rather than providing the basis for a new system of order and authority, it gives rise to radical forms of freedom and ontological contingency characteristic of the postmodern condition (Vattimo 2007, 27-47). Rather than establishing a new kind of social unity and homogeneity, as Schmitt had hoped, Christianity, in its secularised form, leads to a greater awareness of pluralism, and therefore to a greater sense of personal liberation and the freedom to interpret one's life as one chooses. While Vattimo would no doubt reject the association, we could say that his notion of radical hermeneutic freedom, which he sees as the ultimate destiny of Christianity, fits in with a certain vision of liberal pluralism.<sup>7</sup> Richard Rorty's (1989) earlier commitments to a non-foundationalist liberalism come to mind here.<sup>8</sup>

The field of political theology is also being diversified from a different direction, through an engagement with other religious traditions like Islam and Judaism. As Andrew F. March (2013) shows, while Islamic political theology is largely concerned with sovereignty and its legitimation, there are tendencies within this broad tradition – for instance, tensions between religious law and political power – which can give rise to more democratic forms of politics, as has been witnessed in the revolts of the Arab Spring. Within Judaism, an absolutely monotheistic religion, there is nevertheless scope for alternative and more pluralistic political theologies, ones that

are more compatible with secular liberalism, as could be found in the philosophy of Spinoza (see Strauss 1982), Moses Mendelssohn and Hermann Cohen (see Rashkover and Kavka 2013); not to mention the more mystical and messianic traditions of Jewish philosophy – Rosenzweig, Buber, Scholem, Landauer and Benjamin – which go well beyond the conceptual limits of liberalism, and which destabilise the foundations of nation state sovereignty, often taking political theology in more radical, even anarchic, directions (see Rosenstock 2010; Martel 2012; Löwy 2017).

These interventions suggest we take a broader view of political theology, one that is no longer bound to the conservative Schmittian version discussed above, and which can inform contemporary social movements and emancipatory forms politics, such as Occupy and Black Lives Matter (see Miller 2019). The interpretation of political theology here is entirely opposed to Schmitt's sovereign-centric model, emphasising instead a theology of immanence that is reflective of horizontal, decentralised and radically democratic forms of politics (see Robbins 2011). It also presents, I would argue, important challenges to the liberal democratic model of the state and to conventional ideas of political representation and civic engagement.

Of particular interest here is ecological political theology, which builds on continental philosophy (see Bennett 2009) and 'process theology' (see Cobb and Griffin 1979; Whitehead 1979) in order to respond to the implications of the Anthropocene age and the environmental crisis. In emphasising our immanent connectedness and entanglement with natural and non-human worlds, it often presents a pantheistic political theology that departs not only from Schmitt's anthropomorphic and transcendent way of thinking (see Keller 2015) but also goes beyond accepted liberal categories of agency and individuality. Central here is the increasing awareness, brought on by the looming environmental crisis, of the common world we share with nature and with non-human life forms, such that we can no longer think of ourselves as autonomous individuals ontologically separated from these ecosystems (see Keller and Rubenstein 2017). This is a realisation that can inspire new forms of interspecies cooperation, and indeed new conceptions of political community (see Latour 2017).

While these alternative political theologies do not fit easily within the categories of liberal political philosophy, they have a broader significance in showing how the contemporary political terrain is being pluralised, not only by different religions with their claim to the public space, but also by new secular social movements and ecological sensibilities that have an unmistakably theological character. For instance, climate justice movements such as Extinction Rebellion would seem to be modern-day secular forms of millenarianism, for which the imaginary of the Apocalypse and the 'end of times' narrative is the main mobilising force. Moreover, faith-based communities and organisations are often present at climate change demonstrations, and they usually involve prayer and other religious rituals. Contemporary ecological activism more generally aims at the re-enchantment of the secular political space through the encounter with nature and the non-human world, something that can lead to a multi-religious pluralisation of political theology (see Kidwell 2019). I would argue that these movements also necessitate a pluralisation of liberal political theory itself by expanding the definition of religion to the 'non-religious' and, in general, heightening our awareness of the growing porosity of the secular public space. If the line between theology and politics appears increasingly indistinct today – if secular political movements come to resemble religious movements and if religious groups and communities are prepared to engage in public dissent and protest – then we need to think about how this alters the terms of liberal political discourse.

### Moltmann's public theology

In exploring this question, I would like to focus on the thought of the Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann. In the 1960s Moltmann developed a form of eschatological Christian theology based on the idea of hope embodied in Christ's resurrection - one that was, at the same time, strongly influenced by critical social theory and theologies of liberation (Moltmann 1967). Moltmann's interest in liberation struggles follows a long theological tradition of engagement with political issues and social justice causes – from Social Gospel in the US, to the liberation theology of Metz, Gutiérrez and Sölle, to prominent theologians like the dissident Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as well as Reinhold Niebuhr and Max Stackhouse.<sup>9</sup> What makes Moltmann particularly relevant here is that he develops a distinct political or public theology radically opposed to that of Schmitt, and which, in its defence of human

rights and constitutionalism, has a strong attraction for liberalism. On the other hand, Moltmann's political theology, in its call for the de-privatisation of Christianity, for it to play a more prominent and critical role in public life, goes beyond the liberal model of the strictly secular public sphere and allows us to rethink its conceptual boundaries in ways that can, at the same time, rejuvenate liberal politics and provide it with new grounds for legitimacy. My claim here is that Moltmann's political theology deepens liberalism's commitment to pluralism, not only in showing that religion can engage more openly in politics without undermining the idea of the formally neutral, secular public space, but also in scrambling the normative codes of liberal politics by making the struggles for ecological and social justice a core part of its discourse. Central to Moltmann's political theology is the role of organised religion in the critique of power, even of its own power, and it is this guiding ethos that I see as key to a new kind of resistant political pluralism.

To make sense of this, it is necessary to see how Moltmann's political theology contrasts with Schmitt's. Indeed, in Moltmann's eyes, Schmitt's sovereign-centric political thinking is not really a political theology at all, in the sense that it has nothing to do with any genuine Christian theology. Rather, it is a *political religion*, that is, a religion of power, a way of justifying, using the garb of theology, an absolutist sovereign state.<sup>10</sup> Just as Hobbes invented a new religion of the state, personified in the figure of Leviathan, Schmitt formulates a political religion based, as we have seen, on the translation of theological into political concepts. Yet, according to Moltmann, in the wake of Auschwitz and the failures of the totalitarian state, a new kind of political theology developed, based on renewing the vocation of the church as a critical political voice in society:

The determining subject of the new political theology, however, is Christian existence in its difference from general civil existence, and the church in its difference from society and state. So the aim of the new political theology is to strip the magic from political and civil religion, and to subject to criticism the state ideologies which are supposed to create unity at the cost of liberty. In this way it places itself in the history of the impact of Christianity on politics, which means the desacralization of the state, the relativization of forms of



political order, and the democratization of political decisions (Moltmann 1999, 44).

Paradoxically, Christianity asserts its political existence, as part of this new political theology, by maintaining a certain critical distance from both society and the state. It resists any kind of incorporation into, or alliance with, the state. Rather, its role here is to radically dissociate from the state, to condemn its abuses of power and thereby contribute towards a democratisation and pluralisation of society. At the same time, Christianity should be something more than a privatised belief system that fits in with the existing social order without challenging it. The church should be something more than simply another private organisation in society. Moltmann refers to the Exodus Church, as being in a sense at home *nowhere*, and thus embodying a critical distance from both the state and society (see Paeth 2005, 215-234). The idea that religion should be confined to private belief and conscience and kept separate from politics was what led to the church's infamous silence in the face of the crimes of the Nazi regime. According to Moltmann (1999, 49) 'This privatization of religion secularised politics' and opened the way for a new and monstrous political religion to emerge. At the same time, Moltmann does not reject secularism as such, but seeks to redefine its terms, so that Christianity can enter into an alliance with civil society and support secular political causes and struggles for emancipation. Yet, this newfound public and political role for the church simply means remaining faithful to the core principles of Christianity – those of social justice – defined by the Sermon on the Mount (1999, 49-50).<sup>11</sup>

In stark contrast to Schmitt's political religion, which is concerned with shoring up political power, Moltmann's political theology is aimed at the renewal of civil society and public life: here churches and religious organisations can play a more prominent, yet independent and critical, role in politics by, for instance, aligning themselves with progressive and secular social movements and causes. Moltmann believes that the Christian church should align itself with struggles for human liberation, whether for social and economic justice, anti-racism, anti-colonialism, as well as ecology. Of particular interest here is Moltmann's defence of human rights as providing a language for human liberation, one that is international and cosmopolitan rather than confined to particular national communities or religious and cultural identities. Insofar

as human rights invoke the idea of human dignity, they are genuinely universal. Moreover, human rights embody the fundamental principles of liberty and equality. According to Moltmann, these 'liberal' principles and values were already reflective of many religious traditions, particularly Christianity, Judaism and Islam, which believe that all humans, both rulers and ruled, are created equally after God's image. And it was this idea of the equal recognition of human dignity which led to the humanisation of politics and the emergence of liberal political institutions, such as the separation of powers and constitutions designed to limit political authority and protect human dignity from violation: 'The institutions of law, government and economy must respect this personal dignity, which is the endowment of all human beings, if they claim to be 'humane institutions'.' (1999, 122-123) This theological idea of equal human dignity led to a democratisation of European society and produced a new form of political legitimacy based on respect for the equality and liberty of all human beings: 'Any exercise of rule must legitimate itself before other human beings.' (1999, 123)

At the same time, Moltmann argues that liberalism, in its focus on individual rights, neglected questions of economic equality and the social dimension of freedom, which could only be realised collectively. Individual human rights and social rights must therefore be seen as inextricably linked, each deriving their meaning and significance from the other. Moltmann's political theology of human rights proposes a discursive and political interlinking – a kind of 'intersectionality' - of different struggles and political horizons, which tends towards a genuine universality. He puts it in the following way (1999, 121):

1. No individual human rights without social human rights.
2. No human rights without the right of humanity to protection from mass annihilation and genetic change, and to survival in the sequence of the generations.
3. No economic human rights without ecological obligations towards the rights of nature.
4. No human rights without the right of the earth.

This schema of interlocking applications of human rights is aimed at human survival and the protection of human dignity. Human beings must be protected not only from political domination, but also from nuclear annihilation and genetic manipulation. Their economic security must be guaranteed, which means that negative individual rights must go hand in hand with positive social and economic rights, such as the right to work and the right to an income.

However, none of these rights are achievable, even conceivable, without an accompanying understanding of the rights of nature, of the earth, which impose upon us serious obligations for its protection. Moltmann develops an ecological theology of creation that rejects an anthropocentric view of the world for a *theocentric* one: the earth is not man's property but God's – it is the house of God – and while humans have stewardship of the earth, they do not have the sovereign right to exploit it irresponsibly and without regard to all its other non-human inhabitants, whose equal rights and status must be recognised (see Moltmann 1985). Moreover, this non-anthropocentric way of thinking also decentres the idea of a sovereign anthropomorphic and transcendent God. Rather, God should be seen as immanent within nature, as living within his own house and as part of his own creation. The emphasis of Moltmann's eco-theology is on our contingency and our *entanglement* with the earth and with natural ecosystems, upon which our survival depends, to which we therefore have obligations, and whose rights we must therefore respect. Importantly, it is also a form of political theology which, unlike Schmitt's, is not sovereign-centric, not only because it rejects political monotheism and affirms instead a more pluralistic, 'federal' model based on rights, democracy and constitutional rule, but also because it rejects the anthropomorphic ontology that forms the basis of man's domination of both man and nature.

What is important, for our purposes, in Moltmann's version of political or public theology is that it works within the framework of liberalism, but at the same time transforms and pluralises it. As we have seen, the liberal horizon of individual rights is opened up to a broader articulation of social and ecological rights, and to a plurality of different struggles against oppression. Moltmann shows, furthermore, that political theology – that is an understanding of politics informed by theology – does not have to yield the same political conclusions as Schmitt's sovereign centric

political religion. On the contrary, alternative interpretations of Christian political theology are more likely to promote a pluralism of human and ecological interests and the development of a framework of rights to protect them. Moreover, as we have seen, the more prominent role that Moltmann wants to see Christian communities play in supporting social struggles and in speaking out against domination in no way threatens the idea of the secular public space but, rather, deepens it. Here the church takes up the position of the *outsider* in its political engagement, remaining neither a private organisation within existing society, nor aligning itself with the state, but retaining a critical distance from both, allowing it to speak out on issues of injustice and oppression.

## Conclusion

Political theology, as a mode of political theorising that investigates the intertwining of theology and politics, clearly has ambiguous implications for liberal theory, particularly in terms of its response to the post-secular condition and to the question of religious pluralism. I have investigated some of these implications, especially the issue of the legitimacy of the liberal political order. I have argued that, while Schmitt's political theology forces an encounter with the limits of liberalism, his political absolutism and hostility to pluralism make his approach untenable as a framework of legitimacy in contemporary post-secular societies. A more compelling approach can be found in alternative political theologies that have sought to grasp the full consequences of the secular and, in seeking a theological grounding for secular movements of emancipation, have contributed towards a deeper pluralisation of the political field.

Here I have explored Moltmann's radical political theology. In contrast to Schmitt's conservative political theology, which ends up as a sacralisation of the sovereign state, Moltmann's understanding of the church's political role translates into a critique of state power and an adherence to liberal institutions and principles such as human rights. At the same time, the incorporation of social struggles and ecological concerns into his eco-theologically grounded conception of rights, pluralises the terms of the liberal normative framework in which it is otherwise largely situated.

The paper started with the question of whether liberalism can be considered a political religion, in other words whether its formal commitment to state neutrality, toleration, secularism and pluralism is belied by its inextricable structural relationship to a theologically grounded concept of sovereignty - as indeed was Schmitt's claim. Moltmann's alternative rendering of political theology allows us to approach this question in an entirely different way. While the relationship between theology and politics is affirmed, it is no longer aimed at legitimising political authority but, rather, at invigorating a new, autonomous political sphere, one that is neither strictly public nor private, neither entirely secular nor religious, but which blurs the lines between them and is oriented towards human and environmental emancipation and a critique of political power. My argument has been that a more pluralistic form of political theology, such as that offered by Moltmann, provides us with a compelling framework in which to rethink liberalism's commitment to rights: by linking human rights to social and economic rights, and these to rights of the environment and of non-human species, Moltmann not only proposes a theological basis for ecological politics, but also expands the discursive parameters of liberal theory in ways that might at first seem difficult to accommodate but which, I believe, are necessary if liberalism is to remain relevant to contemporary political struggles, including and especially those for racial and climate justice.

It must be acknowledged that Moltmann's eco-political theology – which he tries to make compatible with theo-centrism – is generally at odds not only with most anthropocentric and humanistic political traditions, including liberalism, as well as with aspects of the Christian tradition itself, which has generally been an anthropomorphic religion. Yet the ecological crisis places the experience of the both secular and the religious in a new light, revealing the limits of liberal and Enlightenment ideas of progress and suggesting the need for a spiritual re-enchantment of the world. Here I believe that a new theologically-inspired form of pluralism, as conveyed in Moltmann's eco-theological approach, can offer important conceptual resources – or at very least the ethical imperative – for precisely this sort of project.

My overall claim, then, is that liberal political theory has nothing to fear from a blurring of the line between the religious and the secular – from the politicisation of

religious groups and the theologisation of secular politics – as long as this is aligned with movements for human and ecological liberation and emerges as part of a critique of political power. Indeed, political theology, thought about in these terms, can help us make sense of the new movements and modes of political engagement that are coming to define post-secular societies.

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<sup>1</sup> There are some recent exceptions here (see Losonczi and Singh 2010; and Speight and Zank 2017).

<sup>2</sup> For a sense of this diversity of approaches to political theology see (Cavanaugh and Peter Scott 2019; and de Vries and Sullivan 2006)

<sup>3</sup> The importance of a more sustained engagement with theology has been more recently recognised by several continental political philosophers, including Giorgio Agamben, who seeks to rethink political theology with and against Schmitt. In his archaeology of liberal government, Agamben (2012) displaces Schmitt's monotheistic model of sovereignty through the notion of *oikonomia*, deriving from Trinitarian doctrine, tracing this back to early Patristic debates.

<sup>4</sup> See Eric Voegelin on political religions (2000).

<sup>5</sup> Populism can be seen as a form of political theology (see Arato 2013, 143-172).

<sup>6</sup> See Jean L. Cohen's critique of 'deep' jurisdictional pluralists who question the liberal state's right to regulate religious communities (2017, 83-102).

<sup>7</sup> At the same time, Vattimo casts doubt on liberalism's ability to solve the problems of intercultural conflict by consigning religion to the private sphere (see Vattimo 2002, 94-95).

<sup>8</sup> See Rorty's more recent engagements with Vattimo on the subject of religion (Rorty and Vattimo 2005).

<sup>9</sup> For a useful survey of different approaches in 'public theology' see Kim and Day (2017).

<sup>10</sup> Here Moltmann's critique reflects that of other 'liberation theologians' around this time – such as JB Metz and Dorothee Sölle – of political idolatry, in other words, of the sacralisation of political power. Working within a different tradition, Walter Benjamin's notion of 'divine violence' might also be seen as a rejection of political idolatry (see Martel 2012).

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<sup>11</sup> In his later *Political Theology II*, Schmitt (2008, 4-15 n. 3) discusses Moltmann's political theology, and essentially agrees with his claim that the Crucifixion had a *political* rather than simply a theological significance. However, Schmitt makes this point as part of his broader defence of the idea of political theology against the attack by Erik Peterson that there is no sound theological basis for it.