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Theology, Politics, and Antimodernism in Nazi Germany: Problematizing Theological Rhetoric and Political Theology

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release of nineteen other captured Indians, or refusing to shoot the Indian, which the captain says will lead him to shoot the nineteen others (95). Fisher notes that philosophers disagree about what the botanist ought to do, which he takes as a weakness of absolutist theories. But the point of Williams' example, which he offered in an exchange over utilitarianism, is that morality involves more than weighing and numbers, even of lives. It also involves agency, intention, and responsibility. Williams means for his reader to feel the pull of the notion that some things ought not to be done despite the consequences of not doing them. Consequentialism, by contrast, purports to weigh what cannot be weighed — a given state of affairs versus an agent's responsibility never to act against a basic human good, in this case, life. The choice it proposes is one that a person cannot coherently perform. If an absolutist ethic — deontological or natural law — were to allow such weighing to take place, then it would no longer be the moral theory that it purports to be. In that case, however, it could no longer be combined with other theories of morality, as Fisher proposes to do in his tripartite amalgam.

**Theology, Politics, and Antimodernism in Nazi Germany:
Problematising Theological Rhetoric and Political Theology**

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***Hitler's Theology: A Study in Political Religion.* By Rainer Bucher. Translated by Rebecca Pohl. Edited and with an introduction by Michael Hoelzl. London: Continuum, 2011. xx + 140 pp. \$120.00 Cloth, \$34.95 Paper**

***Theological Tractates.* By Erik Peterson. Edited, translated, and with an introduction by Michael J. Hollerich. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011. xxx + 256 pp. \$75.00 Cloth, \$24.95 Paper**

It is difficult to overestimate the perfect storm of crises that finally overwhelmed the young Weimar Republic, crises that touched the entire spectrum of public life and left many Germans with a deep mistrust of modern liberal democracy. As Michael Hoelzl points out in his introduction to

Rainer Bucher's study of Adolf Hitler's theology, Hitler frequently employed theological arguments to offer a paradoxical promise to the German people: he would provide all the benefits of modernity (technology, economic growth, social welfare, unity) without the accompanying modern liberal ideals of pluralism and democracy, which Hitler believed had contributed to social disintegration and a dilution of German vigor and purity (xvi). To deliver that promise, Hitler appealed to a carefully crafted image of God to sanctify his racist, militarist project. While Hitler utilized a variety of methods to accomplish his goals, their theological foundation must not be overlooked because, as Bucher argues, "Hitler's theology is intellectually crude, its racism is abominable and its God is a numinous monster. It harbours no mercy, no charity and thus also no peace. But it became — and truly all theology aims to be this — practical" (x). What makes Bucher's study unique is his proposal that Hitler's theological rhetoric, far from being a disingenuous concession to deeply held German religious convictions, accurately represents his own thinking about the relationship between religion and ideology and that understanding Hitler's worldview therefore requires a careful consideration of his theological statements (14).

Drawing on Eric Voegelin's work in *Die politischen Religionen*, Bucher characterizes Hitler's theological rhetoric as serving to establish a political religion, which Voegelin defines as "political mass movements that sacralize the intramundane — such as the State, race, or class — with the aim of bringing about an ideal intramundane state of affairs" (11). Hitler's vision of this "ideal intramundane state of affairs" includes the expansion of German territory, the elimination of European Jews, and the destruction of liberal, pluralistic democracy, and its accompanying social conditions, all rooted in the pseudo-scientific notion of the Aryan race (4). As Voegelin argued, on the surface political religions share much in common with "classical" Western religious traditions, but the striking difference between them is that while the classical Western religions each in their own way ascribe salvation to supra-historical causes, political religions insist that salvation is possible, and indeed necessary *within* history (11). Rather than expect salvation from God alone, Nazi salvation is secured with the triumph of *Volk und Vaterland* (24–28). For Hitler, the source of this salvation is a God whose creation and providence favor the German people.

Hitler sought to emulate Christianity's claim to universal scope and validity without adopting its universalist soteriological possibilities and its nuanced reading of the relationship between history and eschatology. To undergird this formal identification divorced from its doctrinal content,

Hitler proposed a *völkisch* interpretation of divine creation in which God's creative purposes are fully realized only in the German nation. He declared his racist program to be the enactment of what God had already inscribed into the very fabric of nature and human history: the superiority of the Aryan race and the German *Volk*. Thus, the pursuit of racial purity and the extermination of "inferior" peoples serve to accomplish God's intentions for the world and for human society (61). Such a notion is universal insofar as it reaches into every corner of society and plays out on the stage of universal human history. But to reinforce the privileged status of the German nation and of Hitler's own mission, Hitler turns to providence, the most frequently enunciated of his theological themes.

In Christian theology, the doctrine of providence concerns God's continuing governance of the world and God's direction of history toward God's desired ends. In rhetoric devoid of irony, Hitler frequently alludes to Germany's status as God's "chosen people" who are destined for a messianic role in human history. God has chosen Germany to be the master race, the perfect model of human society, the messianic people who will realize God's will within history. In a speech delivered in 1937, Hitler confesses that, "At the bottom of our hearts, we National Socialists are devout! We have no choice: no one can make national or world history if his deeds and abilities are not blessed by Providence" (52). In another speech from 1937, Hitler again refers to God's providence as the guarantor of the movement's success:

We, therefore, go our way into the future with the deepest belief in God. Would all we have achieved been possible had Providence not helped us? I know that the fruits of human labor are hard-won and transitory if they are not blessed by the Omnipotent. Work such as ours which has received the blessings of the Omnipotent can never again be undone by mere mortals (52).

Providence is frequently cited as the hidden hand that has guided the movement through its many trials and tribulations and has now positioned Germany to attain its rightful place atop the world. By drawing specific events from the history of the movement into the realm of providence, Hitler effectively insinuates that all who oppose him are on the wrong side of history, the implication being that God is squarely on the side of the Nazis and therefore any who oppose Hitler oppose God's will. As Bucher notes, "The function of the idea of Providence is made clear in

Hitler's theological discourse: It serves as the *central legitimising category from the perspective of the theology of history for his own project*" (55).

What is clear from these few quotations is that Hitler genuinely believes that divine providence is guiding the Nazi movement and will ultimately reward those who remain faithful to the movement. But what is just as clear is that Hitler's view of providence requires a correlated view of faith as absolute certainty and obedience. If God's providence demonstrably guides Hitler, then this divine imprimatur eliminates any possibility of doubt or criticism: to doubt Hitler is to doubt God. Therefore faith, in Hitler's worldview, is a fanatical commitment to the cause, a total surrender of the individual to the *Volk*, and a willingness to fight and die to guarantee history's fulfillment through the movement (69). Such faith is not content to live in the hope of a supernatural salvation; rather, faith must bear fruit in unyielding devotion to the state and in concrete political action, all guided by the hand of providence toward the consummation of human history in the triumph of the German nation.

Bucher's penultimate chapters treat the conditions that paved the way for Hitler's success, particularly in terms of religious and ideological justifications for his totalitarian regime. Ironically, the success of this antimodern movement depended at every step of the way on a thoroughly modernist appropriation of technology and state organization. Bucher suggests that Hitler's project represents "the darker side of modernity itself" while also rejecting many of modernity's basic principles. Two important examples are Hitler's rejection of the bourgeois subject and of competing religious and secular legitimations of political power. In the first instance, Hitler replaces the bourgeois subject with the collectivist notion of the *Volk*, while in the second instance the legitimation of political power rests on a mythic, mystical foundation in race, land, and nation; taken together, the result is the anti-pluralist, unifying concept of the *Volksgemeinschaft* (85–86). As Bucher observes, the idea of the *Volksgemeinschaft* was the central organizing principle of the diverse aspects of the Nazi project. An unapologetically exclusivist definition of God informs the nationalist and racist vision of the *Volksgemeinschaft* in such a way that sacralizes the pseudo-scientific social Darwinism funding Hitler's plans for "Greater Germany":

At the core of these politics lies a project of purification, of "cleansing," of liberation — however not always from my own sins or my own mortality, but from the others and the imposition that they represent. This God promises an "eliminatory salvation," salvation at the cost of the existence of

others. This is salvation from the ills of this world by eliminating everything and everybody allegedly responsible for my suffering. This “salvation” certainly has one great advantage: it can be politically produced, or so at least it promises (112).

What is finally at stake here is a crisis of legitimation, once the premodern unity of the religious and political spheres is fractured and with it the stabilizing “myth of identity” (89). In pluralistic democracies, government is legitimized by the will of the people and the consent of the governed. In Nazism, legitimation is secured in three related ways: the cult of the Führer, biological and occultist racism, and non-discursive methods of instilling and intensifying the orienting myth of Germany’s origins and destiny (ceremonies, rituals, symbols, etc.) (88–89). In the face of a modern liberal pluralism that threatens to dissolve the particular nation and race into the universal community, Hitler reinforces anti-pluralist particularity by various means, including his theological rhetoric. For Hitler, God functions as the totalizing signifier providing absolute and unquestionable legitimation in the concrete life of the *Volkgemeinschaft*, given vitality in Hitler’s frequent use of theological rhetoric to enforce his vision of *Deutschland über alles*, of this particular nation attaining universal dominion.

Hitler’s references to God, particularly to divine providence guiding the course of world history, bathe Germany in the light of divine election, blessing, and certainty. Hitler’s God is a sanctifier of totalitarian domination, of power, exclusion, racism, and violence. That many Christian theologians and laypersons supported the Nazis and blessed their efforts as consistent with God’s will demonstrates the power of theological rhetoric in the political realm and the need to pay careful attention to the ways that rhetoric is constructed and employed because, as Bucher observes, all theology inevitably becomes practical and functions not just as a way of thinking and believing, but as a way of living and acting in the world, for good or for ill.

One Christian theologian who did not succumb to Hitler’s charms and the early successes of the Nazi movement was Erik Peterson, a German scholar of early Christianity most celebrated for his highly publicized conversion from Lutheranism to Roman Catholicism in 1929. While the “Peterson case” generated significant interest at the time, attention to Peterson waned after his conversion. But what invites a consideration of Peterson’s work alongside an analysis of Hitler’s use of theological rhetoric to support his antimodern, anti-democratic project is the fact that

Peterson scorned Hitler and the Nazis despite his own antimodern and anti-democratic worldview, and for explicitly theological and political reasons. What emerges from a consideration of the major themes of Peterson's writings is a deeper appreciation of the complex relations between theology, politics, and modernity, specifically of the myriad positions Christianity can be enlisted to support.

Peterson's work can be divided into the periods before and after his conversion to Roman Catholicism. In the first period, represented in *Theological Tractates* by essays published between 1927 and 1929, Peterson laments Protestantism's loss of privilege in German political and cultural life due to the secularizing influence of the Weimar Constitution. Even here, it is clear that Peterson will soon depart Protestantism for the Roman Catholic Church, whose antimodern authoritarian tendencies and foundation in tradition and dogma he found particularly appealing (xi–xii). In the second period, represented in the collection by essays published between 1929 and 1937, he turns his attention to early church history and eschatology. This focus on eschatology uniquely illuminates Peterson's thinking on the relationship between theology, politics, and modernity.

The Weimar period was a time of immense upheaval in German Protestantism, both theologically and politically. Theologically, the disaster of the First World War convinced many younger theologians of the bankruptcy of the dominant liberal theology, which they blamed for nurturing Germany's military ambitions. Politically, Weimar's official separation of church and state ended over 300 years of state sponsorship of Protestantism in much of Germany and with it the cultural, intellectual, and political prestige of the church. In his collected correspondence with the liberal Protestant historical theologian, Adolf von Harnack, Peterson laments Protestantism's loss of status and influence in the Weimar Republic and with it its "public character," a theme to which Peterson constantly returns in his work. Once the church sacrifices its dogmatic foundation for the sake of cultural relevance (what Peterson calls the "embourgeoisement" of Christianity), all hope of maintaining its privileged status in German life is likewise lost. When the church is no longer the foundation of the state, the absolute authority of church and dogma are forfeited and the church becomes little more than a voluntary association. This, coupled with the loss of state-sanctioned confessional territories, means that there is no longer a Protestant "church" in any traditional sense of that term, leaving only one option: return to Rome. And this is precisely what Peterson does (15–29).

Once Peterson made his decisive break with Protestantism in 1929, his essays assume a markedly different tone. In his Protestant period, he concerned himself with contemporary issues of church and state, but in his Catholic period he abandons the present and turns his attention to the early church. In these later essays, Peterson takes the current church-political climate as a cue to abandon any hope of the church once again gaining its privileged status in German life and instead lodges his hope in eschatological time beyond this world. What few oblique references to Hitler one might glean from these essays reveal Peterson's thinking about contemporary political issues from this eschatological perspective, in which Hitler functions as something akin to the Antichrist or the false prophet of Revelation, seducing the people away from their true religion to a false god. But rather than advocate a worldly solution to a worldly problem, Peterson appeals to the world of angels, saints and martyrs, whose intercession prepares a place for believers in the "heavenly polis" (112).

Despite his veiled criticisms of Hitler, Peterson, too, is antimodern, anti-pluralistic, and anti-democratic in his thinking; his criticisms solely concern the anti-Christian worldview of the Nazis. For example, Peterson's statements about the Jews, while more nuanced, are little better than statements made by the Nazi-supporting *Deutsche Christen*. In "The Church from Jews to Gentiles," he does entertain the possibility of Israel's salvation, but he also refers to Jews as exhibiting "famous Jewish cleverness" (62), enduring an "ambiguous existence" (66) with a "certain hysteria [that] has marked [their] metaphysical character" ever since their forbears rejected their Messiah (63). However, the striking difference between Peterson's view and the Nazis' is that Peterson rejects any political solution to the so-called "Jewish problem," instead relying on "the eschatological patience of God" (52).

This eschatological note is struck once again in the last essay in the collection, "Witness to the Truth." Ostensibly a study of martyrdom, much of the essay is devoted to the signs of the Antichrist and his power over this world, particularly its politics. Mundane decisions are transposed into decisions of ultimate significance: confession of Christ and likely suffering in this world, or denial of Christ and likely damnation in the next. As Peterson puts it, "Because human thinking is never independent of the *hic et nunc* of a political order of some kind, it inevitably stands either under the power of the Antichrist or the power of Christ" (166). There is a stark distinction between the powers of this world and the power of the Christ, whose kingdom, according to the Gospel of John, is not of this world (John 18:36). Political decisions are meaningful not so much as they

impact life in this world, but as they impact life in the world to come. Political activity grounded in anything or anyone other than Christ are in thrall to Revelation's Whore of Babylon, whose contemporary guise is the "metaphysical disorientation of a false political order: the political, whose plane of activity is in the world of pluralism, is always tempted to abandon the ultimate metaphysical orientation and to seek its gods in the world of the pluralistic" (167–168). In a denunciation of both Jews and Nazis, Peterson likens political ambitions to a rejection of the Kingdom of God, arguing that "[n]either Herod nor the Jewish people, neither the representative of monarchy nor the people [*Volk*] who yearn for a leader [*Führer*] and a king to sate their hunger, understand the Kingdom of Christ" (173).

What is clear from these passages is Peterson's disdain for any worldview that is not exclusively rooted in Christ and the church. What Peterson longed for in his Protestant period is finally realized in his Catholic period: an alternative political reality grounded not in the state and its politics but in the church and its faith. In Peterson's understanding, the relationship between church and state is one of subordinating the state to the church, the political to the theological, and the historical to the eschatological. This is the theme of "Christ as Emperor," in which early Christian references to Christ as emperor are taken as a model of the relationship between church and state, with Christ establishing an eschatological empire demanding ultimate allegiance (147). But nowhere is this rejection of Christian subservience to political power more pronounced than in what is perhaps Peterson's best-known work, "Monotheism as a Political Problem."

Here Peterson examines the theological roots of monarchy, first in the neo-Platonic notion of absolute unity, then in Judaism's radical monotheism, before concluding with thoughts on early Christian forays into political theology. His conclusions are rather startling: there can be no such thing as a "political theology" without fundamentally betraying the Christian faith. This does not mean that theology has nothing to say in the political realm; in fact, Peterson's essays vibrate on the frequency of the "public character" of theology, but this is for the sake of apologetics, not politics per se. Reading the early church's trinitarian controversies as a struggle for political legitimacy, Peterson laments the alliance of church and empire in the reign of Constantine and blames Eusebius for replacing genuine Christian theology with imperial propaganda, resulting in catastrophic failure until Augustine finally desacralized empire in *The City of God*. Eusebius justified Constantine's imperial ambitions by ascribing their origins to the divine monarchy, something Ambrose of Milan also suggested when he wrote of the Roman Empire, "[I]iving under one

imperium over the nations, all men learned to confess the imperium of the one almighty God, in faithful eloquence” (98). The one positive result of these flirtations with empire, according to Peterson, was the lesson that Christianity should always remain at a metaphysical distance from the political realm. He credits Augustine’s distinction between the human city and the city of God with rescuing Christianity from political entanglements and fixing its gaze firmly on the world to come (subsequent centuries of contradictory historical evidence notwithstanding) and he concludes his analysis with perhaps the most memorable passage of the essay:

In this way, not only was monotheism as a political problem resolved and the Christian faith liberated from bondage to the Roman Empire, but a fundamental break was made with every ‘political theology’ that misuses the Christian proclamation for the justification of a political situation. Only on the basis of Judaism and paganism can such a thing as a ‘political theology’ exist. The Christian proclamation of the triune God stands beyond Judaism and paganism [...] So too, the peace that the Christian seeks is won by no emperor, but is solely the gift of him who is ‘higher than all understanding’ (104–105).

Any theology that privileges the “earthly polis” over the “heavenly polis” or even attempts to link them is therefore un-Christian and indistinguishable from “fleshly” Judaism and paganism. For this reason, both Nazism *and* Weimar liberalism are to be rejected, as both dethrone Christianity from its privileged position and seek progress and fulfillment on human terms. As Peterson frequently suggests, justice, peace, progress, and the “Jewish problem” are all theological, not political issues, and therefore must have a divine rather than a political solution. Hitler attempted to solve these problems through racial and ethnic cleansing, military conquest, and fascism. The Weimar Republic attempted to solve them with modern pluralistic, liberal democracy. Both will inevitably fail, in Peterson’s estimation, because only God can solve these problems and it is finally to God alone that Christians owe their allegiance and loyalty. Anything else is surrender to the Antichrist and his false prophets. The “public character” of the church’s witness that is a constant theme of Peterson’s work is a vocation of prophetic witness, pointing Christians beyond the realm of politics and history toward the eschatological future:

In the witness that Jesus makes to Pilate that his kingship is not of this world, and in the linking with that witness of the event of the crucifixion and resurrection, the kingship of Christ is actualized *in this world*, so that

his death is a sacrificial offering by which human beings are freed from their sinful bondage under the ‘principalities and powers’ of the present age and called to be participants in the priesthood and kingship of Christ in the age to come (177).

Theological rhetoric is an immensely powerful force in public discourse and can be used to support the widest possible range of worldviews, as Bucher’s and Peterson’s texts attest. In light of the increasing pace of globalization, how theological rhetoric is employed will continue to have very real practical consequences of global significance. It can be used to sanctify violence and racial prejudice, as in the case of Hitler, or it can be used to encourage rejecting this world for the next, as in the case of Peterson, or it can be used to demand justice and progress here and now, as in the case of the whole spectrum of contemporary progressive theologies. The texts by Bucher and Peterson problematize the relationship between theological rhetoric, politics, and modernity and are therefore valuable contributions to the literature on this period of 20th-century political and religious history.

Freedom of Religion in the United States and Around the World

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***The Bible, the School and the Constitution: The Clash that Shaped Modern Church-State Doctrine.* By Steven K. Green. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012. 294 pp. \$29.95**

***The Religion Clauses of the First Amendment: Guarantees of States’ Rights?* By Ellis M. West. Lanham, MD: Lexington Book, 2011. 202 pp. \$70.00**

***Equality, Freedom, and Religion.* By Roger Trigg. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012. 184 pp. \$ 45.00**

In *The Bible, the School, and the Constitution*, Steven K. Green reminds his readers that “modern church-state doctrine” in the United States is largely a product of concerns about schoolchildren. While not all of the