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A “REFORMED FÜHRERPRINZIP”?

On Schmitt’s criticism of Barth in the preface to the second edition of *Political Theology*

TOMMASO MANZON

Abstract. The similarities existing between Carl Schmitt’s thought and that of Karl Barth have been noticed by a growing number of scholars. Nonetheless, there is still much that can be uncovered by comparing their ideas. The specific aim of this paper is to compare their Theologico-political projects. The starting point of my analysis will be Schmitt’s polemics with Barth and his fellows, undertaken in the preface to the second edition of *Political Theology*. Later in my exposition I will discuss the connections between this text and Barth’s manifesto *Theological Existence Today!*

Keywords. Political theology; Carl Schmitt; Karl Barth; Political obedience

1. Introduction

In his *The Political Theology of Paul*, Jacob Taubes styles Carl Schmitt and Karl Barth as “the Zealots of the Absolute and of Decision”¹. In this respect, he held that Barth was proposing nothing else but the “theological variant” of the same problematics raised by Schmitt². Indeed, the similarity between these two thinkers has been noticed by a growing

¹ J. Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul* (1987), trans. by D. Hollander, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2003, p. 62.

² *Ibi*, pp. 62ff.

number of scholars³. Nonetheless, there is still much that can be uncovered by comparing their ideas. In the light of this, the specific aim of this paper is that of comparing their theologico-political projects. In particular, this will be done taking as a starting point Schmitt’s polemics with Barth and his fellows that was perpetrated through the preface to the second edition of *Political Theology* (1934)⁴. Further down the course of my exposition I will discuss the connections between this text and Barth’s manifesto *Theological Existence Today!* This was published by the latter in response to the *Deutsche Christen*’s takeover of the Evangelical Church in 1933 and their subsequent attempt at Nazifying its structures. Moreover, the same pamphlet signaled the rise of an organized opposition to the *Deutsche Christen*’s power with Barth as its theological figurehead⁵.

I will argue that Schmitt’s polemics with those Protestant theologians who opposed Nazification was one of a politico-theological nature. Accordingly, I will endeavor to show the kind of political theology promoted by *Theological Existence Today!* in order to show the features

³ Cf. F.W. Graf, *Die Freiheit der Entsprechung zu Gott. Bemerkungen zum theozentrischen Ansatz der Anthropologie Karl Barths*, in: T. Rendtorff (hrsg.), *Die Realisierung der Freiheit. Beiträge zur Kritik der Theologie Karl Barths*, Gerd Mohn, Gütersloh 1975; F.W. Graf, “Der Götze wackelt? Erste Überlegungen zu Karl Barths Liberalismuskritik”, *Evangelische Theologie* 46 (1986), pp. 422-41; M. Eichorn, *Es wird regiert!: der Staat im Denken Karl Barths und Carl Schmitts in den Jahren 1919 bis 1938*, Duncker & Humblot, Berlin 1994; D. Singh, “A Tale of Two Sovereignties: Karl Barth and Carl Schmitt in Dialogue”, in: M. Höfner (ed.), *Theo-Politics? Conversing with Barth in Western and Asian Contexts*, Fortress Press, Lanham 2021, pp. 147-67.

⁴ Schmitt’s seminal work appears mostly unchanged in its second edition, however, it proved to be more controversial and caused a wider debate than the first one. Apart from the issues that I shall discuss over the course of this paper, it should be remembered that this was the occasion for the publication of Erik Peterson’s *Der Monotheismus als politisches Problem*; cf. M. Nicoletti, *Trascendenza e Potere: La teologia politica di Carl Schmitt*, Morcelliana, Brescia 1990, p. 408; concerning Peterson essay, see L. Pellarin, “Erik Peterson e la *σπάσις*. Una legittimazione sovversiva della teologia politica”, *Humanitas* 76(2021), pp. 445-77.

⁵ For a summary of the theological intentions and church-political aims of the pro-Nazi “Faith Movement of German Christians”, or “Deutsche Christen”, as well as of their takeover of the Evangelical church during the ecclesial elections of 1933, cf. N. Slenzcka, “Das ‘Ende der Neuzeit’ als volksmissionarische Chance? Bemerkungen zum volksmissionarischen Anliegen der Glaubensbewegung, “Deutsche Christen” in der Hannoverschen Landeskirchen in den Jahren 1933/34”, *Kirchliche Zeitsgeschichte* 11(1998), pp. 255-317.

of the intellectual project adversed by Schmitt. In particular, I will focus on Barth's rendering of the concept of *Führerprinzip*, that is, the juridical and political principle according to which absolute obedience was due to an absolute ruler - a principle that in the same period was one of Schmitt's objects of interest⁶. I will also underline the connections between *Theological Existence Today!* and some relevant passages from Barth's earlier *The Epistle to the Romans*, all the while discussing how his theologico-political stance differed from Schmitt's at the time of the second edition of *Political Theology*.

I shall now conclude this introduction with a brief summary of Schmitt's definition of political theology. While this is widely known, it is worth quoting, insofar as it shall serve as a premise to the rest of my argument⁷. As Miguel Vatter puts it, "Schmitt intended the term [political theology] to refer to the structural identity of the concepts employed by the sciences of theology and jurisprudence in medieval thought"⁸. On the ground of this structural identity, Schmitt famously felt warranted to argue that "all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development [...] but also because of their systematic structure"⁹. Accordingly, Vatter claims that "the study of these analogies [between modern doctrines of the state theory and theology] is the subject matter

⁶ This has been defined as the "only ideological orthodoxy" and one of the few ideas commonly held across different fascist movements in the interwar period; B.F. Pauley, "Fascism and the *Führerprinzip*: The Austrian Example", *Central European History* 12(1979), pp. 272-96 (272-3).

⁷ Schmitt claimed to have been the first to introduce "the phrase 'political theology' to literature"; this ought to be taken in a restricted sense: the concept of *theologia civilis* has a very long history that stretches back to Roman times. Cf. C. Schmitt, *Political Theology II: The Myth of the Closure of Any Political Theology* (1970), trans. by M. Hoelzl - G. Ward, Polity Press, Cambridge 2008, p. 35. Concerning the history of the concept, see S. Ferlito, "Gloria e miseria della teologia politica", *Stato e chiesa* 16(2020) (<https://doi.org/10.13130/1971-8543/14273>); M. Nicoletti, *Trascendenza e Potere*, pp. 178ff; M. Vatter, *Divine Democracy: Political Theology after Carl Schmitt*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2021, p. 1ff.

⁸ M. Vatter, "The Political Theology of Carl Schmitt", in: J. Meierhenrich - O. Simons (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2016, pp. 245-68 (245).

⁹ C. Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concepts of Sovereignty* (1922, 1934), ed. by G. Schwab, MIT Press, Cambridge 1988, p. 36.

of political theology understood as a way to do the sociology of concepts¹⁰. Therefore, it could be said that the aim of political theology is that of explaining how these two structures of concepts and norms, that is, those of theology and politics, reflect and explain one another¹¹.

According to Vatter, alongside this “scientific” meaning of political theology¹², the fourth chapter of *Political Theology* seems to deploy a polemical understanding of this concept. Here, Schmitt discusses the relationship between revolutionary politics and Roman Catholic political thought. Before the danger of social dissolution raised by anarchism and other similar movements, Schmitt found in XIX century Catholic political philosophy a political theology that was aimed at preventing such an outcome¹³. He found this posture exemplified by the words of John Henry Newman, according to whom “no medium exists [...] between catholicity and atheism”¹⁴. To prevent atheism from scoring a victory, theological catholicity was to be politically mirrored by the sovereign’s quasi-dictatorial capacity for political decision that stood as the only possible bulwark against the forces threatening to undermine society. Not only Schmitt contrasts this stance with anarchism but also with the “everlasting conversation” of liberalism¹⁵. Therefore, in this respect Schmitt seems to deploy a political theology (in a polemical sense), in the sense that he is discussing a certain way of understanding, modern doctrines of the state as illuminated by Roman Catholic theology. This is opposed

¹⁰ M. Vatter, “The Political Theology of Carl Schmitt”, p. 245.

¹¹ W.D. Hall, “Political Meditations in Confessional Keys: The Political theologies of Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer”, in: L.B. Hale - W.D. Hall (eds.), *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Theology, and Political Resistance*, Lexington Books, London 2020, pp. 49-66 (53-4).

¹² M. Vatter, *Divine Democracy*, cit., p. 21; cf. n. 4.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ C. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 53.

¹⁵ “Catholic political philosophers such as de Maistre, Bonald, and Donoso Cortés [...] would have considered everlasting conversation a product of a gruesomely comic fantasy, for what characterized their counterrevolutionary political philosophy was the recognition that their times needed a decision. And with an energy that rose to an extreme between the two revolutions of 1789 and 1848, they thrust the notion of the decision to the center of their thinking”, *ibidem*.

to a revolutionary and specifically anarchist political (a)theology, whereby atheism and social dissolution is spread. It should be noticed how a year later, in his essay *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, Schmitt would further elaborate on this point that the Roman Catholic Church is provided with “a will to decision [that] culminates in the doctrine of papal infallibility”¹⁶.

Finally, it is important to underline that key to the study of political theology is the question of political representation¹⁷. In fact, both the polemical and the scientific meaning of this syntagm seem to arise from Schmitt’s study of the problems raised by this topic¹⁸. According to him, the exercise of political representation is an indispensable element for the existence of any political order¹⁹. Therefore, regarding this subject the task of political theology is that of explaining how “an abstract complex of norms (jurisprudence) connects to a concrete complex of power (sociology)”²⁰. If this connection fails or does not take place because political representation is absent or malfunctioning, the law is condemned to remain a “ghostly abstraction”²¹, and the political order is bound to dissolve. According to Schmitt, this means that, against the liberal pretense of grounding power in the abstract rule of law and against the anarchist claim concerning the needlessness of law, political order and unity is always and only possible through a Christological conception of representation²². In other words, just like the sovereign Christian God establishes an ordered creation by *fiat ex nihilo* and subsequently devotes himself to the administration of his estate – foremostly in and through his incarna-

¹⁶ C. Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism and Political Form* (1923, 1925), ed. by G. L. Ulmen, Greenwood Press, London 1996, p. 8.

¹⁷ M. Vatter, “The Political Theology of Carl Schmitt”, p. 248.

¹⁸ Id., *Divine Democracy*, p. 23.

¹⁹ Id., “The Political Theology of Carl Schmitt”, p. 249.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² M. Vatter, *Divine Democracy*, p. 23.

tion as Jesus of Nazareth – in the same way the state needs to be established and cohere in a real legal personality²³ (equally, the Church needs to be established and cohere in the real legal personality of the Pope²⁴). The latter will have the authority and the power to uphold and operate the system of legal norms that underpins social life²⁵. Accordingly, we see how the scientific and polemical meanings of political theology come together in the issue of political representation: on the one hand, the latter is discussed from a sociological, juristic and genealogical point of view as the product of the secularization of Christology within the context of European law and politics; on the other hand, Schmitt polemically argues that only a Christ-like political sovereign can hold back the rising tide of anarchism by wielding against it the power of the state²⁶.

If the actual historical establishment of a concrete system of norms can only be actuated by the will of an actual historical political personality²⁷, then the very important question arises of who is actually going to fulfill this role in a particular historical and political situation. As I shall argue, the identity and procedure through which this personality is to be identified is precisely one of the points around which revolves the disagreement between Barth’s and Schmitt’s political theologies.

²³ “To represent in an eminent sense can only be done by a person, that is, not simply a “deputy” but an authoritative person or an idea which, if represented, also becomes personified”, C. Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, p. 21.

²⁴ Cf. G. L. Ulmen, “Introduction”, in: *ibi*, pp. vii-xxxvii (xvi-xvii, xl-xli).

²⁵ As it is widely known, this stance sprung out on Schmitt’s part as part of a polemic led against Hans Kelsen. Federico Lijoi has concisely summed up the dialectic between the two German-speaking jurists: cf. Federico Lijoi, “Si può difendere la democrazia con la dittatura? Hans Kelsen e Carl Schmitt sul custode della costituzione”, in: W. Benjamin - H. Kelsen - K. Löwith - L. Strauss - J. Taubes, *Critica della teologia politica: Voci ebraiche su Carl Schmitt*, eds. G. Fazio e F. Lijoi, Quodlibet, Macerata 2019, pp. 101-124.

²⁶ Vatter argues that Schmitt’s concept of political theology changes in the later *Political Theology II*; since this work falls outside the scope of this paper, I will not discuss this claim; cf. M. Vatter, *Divine Democracy*, p. 23.

²⁷ Cf. M. Maraviglia, *La penultima guerra: Il “katéchon” nella dottrina dell’ordine politico di Carl Schmitt*, LED Edizioni Universitarie, Milano 2006, p. 48.

2. *The preface to the '34 edition of Political Theology*

In the opening salvo of the preface to the second edition of *Political Theology* Schmitt claims that he now distinguishes “not two but three types of legal thinking” and that “in addition to the normativist and the decisionist types” he now takes into consideration institutional legal thinking²⁸. The difference between these three forms of juridic thought is spelled out as follows:

Whereas the pure normativist thinks in terms of impersonal rules, and the decisionist implements the good law of the correctly recognized political situation by means of a personal decision, institutional legal thinking unfolds in institutions and organizations that transcend the personal sphere. [...] The three spheres and elements of the political unity – state, movement, people – thus may be joined to the three juristic types of thinking in their healthy as well as in their distorted forms²⁹.

These words must be contextualized within the changes that Schmitt’s thought was undergoing around the time of his adherence to Nazism. Specifically, during that period he was busy de-emphasizing – without ever totally discounting – the centrality of decisionism in his thought; this was done in favor of a relatively lessened view of the modern state alongside an increased emphasis on “concrete orders”³⁰. In this regard, it is noteworthy that the reference to the three spheres of political unity echoes the subtitle of a work published by Schmitt in the previous year, *State, Movement, People: The Triadic Structure of the Political Unity*. Notoriously, this was Schmitt’s first treatise concerned with the rise of the Nazi dictatorship; within it, he sought to analyze the emerging

²⁸ C. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 2.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³⁰ J.F. Kervégan, *Che fare di Carl Schmitt?* (2011), Bari, Laterza 2016, pp. 14ff; S. Pietropaoli, *Schmitt*, Carocci, Roma 2012, pp. 109ff.

order in terms of its constitutional realities, while also making a case in favor of a one-party state³¹.

Schmitt’s comments concerning the various forms of legal thinking are interspersed with his views on contemporary trends within Protestant theology. Right before the passage previously quoted, Schmitt drops a reference to one of his recent works – *The Age of Neutralization and Depoliticization* – a text concerned with the “the major problem concerning the individual stages of the process of secularization from the theological stage by way of the metaphysical to the ethical and economic stages”³². Discussing this point, Schmitt signals his affinity with some Protestant theologians such as Heinrich Forsthoff and Friedrich Gogarten, who “have shown that without a concept of secularization we cannot understand our history of the last centuries”³³. At the same time, Schmitt registers how within Protestant theology exists “a different, supposedly unpolitical doctrine, conceiving of God as the ‘wholly other’, just as in political liberalism the state and politics are conceived of as the ‘wholly other’”³⁴. This latter theological trend is subsequently chastised by Schmitt with the following words:

we have come to recognize that the political is the total, and as a result we know that any decision about whether something is unpolitical is always a political decision, irrespective of who decides and what reasons are advanced. This also holds for the question whether a particular theology is a political or an unpolitical theology³⁵.

³¹ Cf. G. Schwab, *The Challenge of the Exception: An Introduction to the Political Ideas of Carl Schmitt between 1921 and 1936*, ABC-Clio, Santa Barbara 1989, pp. 108-113.

³² C. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 2.

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

Schmitt's words in this passage are characteristically dense and allusive; thus, in order to understand the breadth and depth of his statements with reference to the topic at stake, it is important to unpack and locate some of Schmitt's explicit and implicit references.

As regards Gogarten and Forsthoff, it is significant to underline how they both had joined the *Deutsche Christen* (German Christians) in 1933³⁶. To be fair, Gogarten had quit the movement soon after and before the publication of the second edition of *Political Theology*, the members of this movement believed that Germany was on the verge of experiencing a spiritual and national revival thanks to the surge of Nazi power. Therefore, theologians affiliated with the German Christians were prone to compare Hitler with Luther, and the significance of the writing of the *Mein Kampf* with the translation of the Bible in German. In their eyes, both men were *Führers* entrusted by God with the mission of leading the German people³⁷. The whole *ethos* of the German Christians was finally condensed in the motto "ein Volk, ein Staat, eine Kirche" (one people, one state, one church)³⁸. Accordingly, they sought to extend Hitler's efforts to Nazify German society to the Protestant church³⁹. After winning the ecclesial elections of 1933 and gaining a political majority in the governing structures of the Protestant regional churches, the German Christians operated a merging of the latter into a single national body. This new entity was gathered under the leadership

³⁶ M. Nicoletti, *Trascendenza e Potere*, p. 414. Actually, Gogarten quit the German Christians quite quickly and a few months before the publication of the 2nd edition of *Political Theology* (*ibi*, p. 414 n. 70). He and Forsthoff were far from being the only Protestant theologians to manifest pro-Nazi sympathies; perhaps, the most noteworthy case was that of Immanuel Hirsch: cf. R.P. Ericksen, "The Göttingen University Theological Faculty: A Test Case in Gleichschaltung and Denazification", *Central European History* 17(1984), pp. 355-83 (pp. 355ff).

³⁷ M. Hüttenhoff, "Ein Lehrer der christlichen Kirche: Karl Barths Kritik am Lutherbild der Deutschen Christen", *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 103(2006), pp. 492-514 (p. 494).

³⁸ M. Nicoletti, *Trascendenza e Potere*, cit., p. 414.

³⁹ Cf. K.D. Bracher, "Stages of Totalitarian 'Integration' (Gleichschaltung): The Consolidation of National Socialist Rule in 1933 and 1934", in: H. Holborn (ed.), *Republic to Reich The Making of the Nazi Revolution, Ten Essays*, Pantheon Books, New York 1972, pp. 109-28.

of a *Reichsbischof* (Reich’s bishop) who responded directly to Hitler. In the light of this situation, it is unsurprising that Schmitt’s remarks in favor of Gogarten and Forsthoff were received as a way to express support for like-minded intellectuals belonging to the Protestant field, as well as a blessing bestowed on the newly-born regime⁴⁰.

The events of 1933, together with the call elevated by the German Christians to exclude Jews from ecclesial posts and to drop the Old Testament from the Biblical canon, caused a countermovement within the Protestant church that was spearheaded by the likes of Martin Niemöller, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth⁴¹. These figures seem to be the ones lying behind Schmitt’s allusion towards a second, inimical, line of Protestant thought, which in his understanding coalesced around the conception of God as wholly other. This can be deduced by the fact that, famously, such a depiction of the divine is a landmark of Barthian theology⁴², which was asserted from the very beginning of his influential *The Epistle to the Romans*⁴³. In this sense, the target of this reference is clear⁴⁴. However, Schmitt avoids the direct mention of Barth’s name. Instead, he refers to an entire range of doctrinal positions, broadly characterized by his ideas. In other words, Schmitt chooses to aim his guns against the whole set of characters that grouped together in order to contrast the German Christians – a group of which Barth was undoubtedly the main thinker⁴⁵.

⁴⁰ M. Nicoletti, *Trascendenza e Potere*, pp. 415.

⁴¹ Cf. R.P. Ericksen, *The Göttingen University Theological Faculty*, pp. 358-60.

⁴² D.J. Cremer, “Protestant Theology in Early Weimar Germany: Barth, Tillich and Bultmann”, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 2(1995), pp. 289-307 (294-5).

⁴³ “Paul is Authorized to deliver – the Gospel of God [...] Yes, precisely – of God! The Gospel is not a religious message to inform mankind of their divinity or to tell them how they may become divine. The Gospel proclaims a God utterly distinct from men”, K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (1919, 1921), trans. by E.C. Hoskyns, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1968, p. 28

⁴⁴ Cf. M. Nicoletti, *Trascendenza e Potere*, cit., pp. 413-4.

⁴⁵ Among Barth’s fellows, it is important to mention the figure of pastor Martin Niemöller. The latter, in spite of his ambivalent relationship towards Nazism and his early support for Hitler was the main organizer of the resistance against the new leadership of the church. Crucially, his center of operation was his church in Dalhem, an affluent suburb in Berlin; incidentally, this was the same city where Schmitt relocated in 1933. Cf. R.P. Ericksen, “Resistance or Complicity? Balancing assessments of German churches under Nazism”, *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 28(2015), pp. 246-61 (260); cf. J.S. Conway, “The Political Theology of Martin

Schmitt depicts the doctrine of God as “wholly other” as an attempt to develop an unpolitical theology, that is, one that would spare his proponents from having to take a political decision concerning the current situation⁴⁶. As it has been previously mentioned, Schmitt counters this position with the statement that “the political is the total”. From this postulate it follows that “whether something is *unpolitical* is always a *political* decision”⁴⁷, insofar as even deciding that something is unpolitical can only be done from within the field of the political. This argument forms an implicit reference to one of Schmitt’s own essay, *The Concept of the Political* (1925), where he famously claimed that “the specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy”⁴⁸. For Schmitt, the distinction between enemy and friend is therefore more fundamental than the state, and indeed of politics. In other words, the political is an original and inescapable dimension of human existence: it needs to be described in terms of its native categories and qualifies human existence as a being-together that is both a state of friendship towards some and a state of enmity towards others; all concrete political associations and arrangements are a product of this primeval distinction⁴⁹.

Thus, we can see how Schmitt is charging the Protestant dissidents of foolishly attempting to place themselves outside the political – and in a way, outside the fundamental structures of the human condition: to argue that God is wholly other and above politics necessarily calls for a declaration of enmity towards those who would politicize this concept. But, according to Schmitt, Barth and his friends are precisely unwilling to do so: rather than taking a stance and declaring the German Christians and

Niemöller”, *German Studies Review* 3(1986), pp. 521-46 (524-6).

⁴⁶ C. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, cit. p. 2.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁸ C. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (1925), ed. by G. Schwab, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press 2007, p. 26.

⁴⁹ M. Nicoletti, *Trascendenza e Potere*, pp. 263-4.

the Nazis as their enemies, they have chosen to pursue an impossible political neutrality. Here, we can find echoes of Schmitt’s negative description of neutrality in *The Guardian of the Constitution* (1929). In this text, the practice of neutrality is negatively understood (with reference to the liberal tradition) as the attempt to withdraw oneself from political decision; accordingly, Schmitt also defines neutrality as non-intervention and passive tolerance⁵⁰.

The second charge waged against the Protestant dissidents regards the fact that they are oblivious to the theologico-political implications of their doctrines. In this regard, Schmitt is accusing these theologians of *de facto* upholding a political theology that basically harkens back to the old liberal order, that is, an order that failed to solve the problems of the Weimar republic (specifically, it failed to declare enmity on the Communists and, ironically, on the Nazis). This emerges thanks to Schmitt’s claim that in this “unpolitical doctrine” God behaves just like “state and politics” behaved under political liberalism⁵¹. Thus, just like the theology of Barth and company is politically impotent because of its attempt to stay aloof from the true ground of politics, so it is bound to be mirrored by a political order that is also deficient for the very same reason. In other words, Schmitt considered the theology of the God who is “wholly other” as incapable of configuring a good political theology (here meant in the polemical sense).

In turn, Schmitt points out how Forsthoff and Gogarten correctly grasped the importance of secularization in order to understand their times⁵². In this regard, in *The Age of Neutralization and Depoliticization* Schmitt argued that, because of the religious wars, European society chose to shift its ideological center of balance away from theology to metaphysics, and then from metaphysics to ethics and finally

⁵⁰ Cf. M. Nicoletti, *Trascendenza e Potere*, p. 359.

⁵¹ C. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 2.

⁵² *Ibidem*.

to economy. This happened as an attempt to find a common ground upon which the lacerating conflicts caused by the Reformation could be solved. However, this failed to happen, with conflicts being simply shifted away from earlier common grounds and now taking place in the economic domain or at any rate primarily because of economic reasons⁵³. According to Schmitt, the only way to solve the problems caused by the dominion of the economic sphere was through the strengthening of national unity⁵⁴. Already by the late 20's he was looking – albeit ideologically unfavorably – to the Bolshevik and Fascist forms of rule as the kinds of “total state” able to rule the economic⁵⁵. I have previously mentioned, in the “Preface of '34” Schmitt claims that political unity is the result of the interplay of three elements: state, (political) movement, and people. Therefore, these are the elements that need to coalesce together harmoniously in order to produce a power capable of defending society and public order. Accordingly, Nazism seemed to have impressed Schmitt as a force that, for all its flaws, was proving capable of solving all national problems in a very short amount of time, precisely by being able to produce this condition of harmony⁵⁶. Forsthoff, Gogarten, and the Protestant supporters of Nazism had read the situation correctly: accordingly, they took the right political decision, and their brand of Christianity was thus supportive of a political theology (once again, meant in a polemical sense) by which it was possible to restore the political order.

As an aside to these remarks grounded in the “Preface of '34”, it should be noticed how in *State, Movement, People* Schmitt claims that each of these three words “may be used alone to denote *the whole* of the

⁵³ Cf. C. Schmitt, *The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations* (1929), in: id. *The Concept of the Political*, pp. 80-96.

⁵⁴ M. Nicoletti, *Trascendenza e Potere*, p. 357.

⁵⁵ Cf. *ibi*, pp. 368-9.

⁵⁶ Cf. H. Quaritsch, *Positionen und Begriffe Carl Schmitts*, Duncker & Humblot, Berlin 1991, pp. 101-2.

political unity”⁵⁷. Accordingly, when he describes Hitler’s leadership as the manifestation of the will of the people⁵⁸, Schmitt intends to say that Hitler has in himself the whole of political unity; subsequently, he also holds a power sufficient to form a total state strong enough to control the conflicts of modernity. Thus, at this junction we see the reappearance of the centrality of the concept of representation, which helps us to reiterate the point made in the previous paragraph: only the Nazis and by extension the German Christians were able to provide the kind of political representation that Schmitt thought necessary to maintain order in the Germany of the early ‘30s. This form of political representation was synthesized in the *Führerprinzip* of gathering all political power and unity in one strong leader. This principle had to be replicated in all departments of society, including the church, in order to guarantee cohesion and order.

Finally, before moving on to Barth’s political theology and his response to this historical situation, we should underline how Schmitt’s interest in political representation, political theology, and the personal nature of politics long predates his positive engagement with Nazism. Accordingly, it would be incorrect to read his pages on XIX century Catholic thought and on Papal infallibility strictly in the light of his later support of Hitler. In this sense, Schmitt’s reflections in the 20s on the necessarily personal nature of sovereign political power should not be reduced to an equivalent of the Fascist *Führerprinzip*. Nonetheless it is undeniable that in his works of 1933-34 we see the application of some of his earlier principles to Nazism and its leader. It is crucial to make this distinction for, as we shall see in the next pages, in his tirade against Christian support for the new regime, Karl Barth will end up associating the *Führerprinzip* of the Nazis with a Romish model of church governance.

⁵⁷ C. Schmitt, *State, Movement, People* (1933), ed. by S. Draghici, Plutarch Press, Corvallis 2001, pp. 11-2.

⁵⁸ Cf. *ibi*, pp. 5-6.

3. Karl Barth's Epistle to the Romans

I shall now turn to Karl Barth, starting with a consideration of the accusation of political passivity that was voiced against him by Schmitt. As a matter of fact, such a depiction of Barth's politics is far from rare among scholars⁵⁹. In good part, this assessment emerges in the light of the revisions in the second edition of his *Epistle to the Romans*. The first edition of this commentary, in spite of having been written during WWI, showed a remarkable theo-political optimism concerning the direction of history as a movement of constant approach towards the final victory of the risen Christ⁶⁰. This optimism did not only spring from Barth's theology, but was also in accordance with his socialist intellectual sympathies which, during his time as a pastor in Safenwil, prompted his direct support of striking miners, and his joining of the Swiss Social Democratic Party⁶¹. However, by the time that the second edition of *Romans* was out in 1922, Barth was focusing more on defending the independence of theology and biblical exegesis from all kinds of political and cultural influences⁶². Consequently, the second edition of *Romans*

⁵⁹ See for instance how this view is framed by D. Singh in a recent article: "Alignment with and obedience to the one, sovereign, transcendent Lord leads one to recognize the profound insignificance of the earthly regimes in light of the eschatological reality of God's kingdom [...] This, in my view, is a Barthian politics of the transcendence of God, a conformity to a divine sovereign whose noncompetitive relation with earthly sovereigns leads to a calculated indifference to earthly regimes", D. Singh, "A Tale of Two Sovereignities", p. 158.

⁶⁰ Cf. G. Thomas, "God's Moving Presence in History. Karl Barth's Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans of 1919 and its Problem-Creating Solutions", in: C. Chalamet (ed.), *Karl Barth's Epistle to the Romans: Retrospect and Prospect*, Berlin, De Gruyter 2022, pp. 157-78 (168-9).

⁶¹ D.J. Cremer, "Protestant Theology in Early Weimar Germany", p. 292; S. Park, *Politische Theologie bei Karl Barth, Helmut Gollwitzer und Jürgen Moltmann: Eine politisch-hermeneutische Untersuchung zum Zusammenhang vom Linksbarthianismus und der "neuen" politischen Theologie*, Springer, Wiesbaden 2018, pp. 15ff; G. Thomas, "God's Moving Presence in History", pp. 169-72.

⁶² "For Barth [in the first edition of *Romans*], Christian participation in political life may occur only on the 'most extreme left' and can be no more than 'preliminary work for the final abolition of evil in a new world [Der Römerbrief 1919, pp. 508, 14]'. In the second edition of *Romans*, the existing order is criticized even more sharply, while Barth continues to affirm the *relative* right of the revolutionary option. He claims that it is 'little likely' that one 'becomes a reactionary on the ground of the Letter to the Romans'. Still, revolutionary activity can become 'titanism' and must be viewed critically because it stands so close to the 'origin of truth' [Der Römerbrief 1922, p. 640]", M. Gockel, "More than Leninism? – Karl Barth's Theological

counterbalanced the previous emphasis on the immanence of the power of God with a theology of the Kingdom’s breaking into immanence from beyond history (however, it must be acknowledged that already in 1919 Barth resisted the idea of simply conflating Christianity with socialist political action)⁶³. Accordingly, he drove a deep wedge between human and divine reality, to the point that no human action could assert to be in itself nothing else but human pride. Subsequently, no action in the social world could be unambiguously sanctioned as that of the Gospel⁶⁴.

Nowhere is Barth’s newfound political stance as visible as in his commentary of Romans 13. There, Barth claims that “the various ordinances by which human society is regulated and governed [...] provide the great demonstration to the order of the Coming World”; therefore, “they must not, as such, be broken through”⁶⁵. Among these ordinances, Barth lists explicitly the church, the state, law and society at large. All of these exist as the objective framework of relationships within which individuals are called to exist⁶⁶. Moreover, each one of these objective spheres of existence is grounded on a certain ethical understanding concerning how life should be lived; as Barth puts it, “these positions [i.e., those of the church, of the state, of law and society] claim to possess the answer to the question, ‘what shall we do?’”⁶⁷ Insofar as they bear such answers, “these powers demand recognition and obedience, and we have to decide whether we shall or shall not yield to their demand”⁶⁸. Barth frames the latter alternative as a choice between legitimism and revolution. This is how he answers this dilemma:

Socialism”, in: C. Chalamet (ed.), *Karl Barth’s Epistles to the Romans*, pp. 179-99 (191).

⁶³ D.J. Cremer, “Protestant Theology in Early Weimar Germany”, p. 292; Thomas, “God’s Moving Presence in History”, pp. 170-1,4.

⁶⁴ *Ibi*, pp. 294-6.

⁶⁵ K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 476.

⁶⁶ *Ibi*, pp. 476-7.

⁶⁷ *Ibi*, p. 477.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*.

being [...] concerned to demonstrate the glory of God, we do not [...] concede the principle of legitimism. But, on the other hand, neither do we [...] concede the principle of revolution. On the contrary [...] we find in the Epistle a direct denial of revolution. We have, however, suggested that we find in it also a denial of legitimism⁶⁹.

These words came from the same man that in a 1911 text claimed that “Jesus Christ is the social movement, and the social movement is Jesus Christ in the present”⁷⁰. In the light of this, we can see why some commentators concluded that in the second edition of *Romans* Barth – while denying reactionary legitimism – ended up adopting a stance of “*de facto* conservatism” and of passive acceptance of the *status quo*⁷¹. However, this rendering of Barth’s position does not take into due consideration his main preoccupation with “the glory of God”; as he puts it:

it is not upon secular authority itself [...] that our attention is concentrated, but upon the requirement that men should not break these regulations. In other words, we are interested in a negative behavior, in a human not-doing⁷².

Therefore, Barth seeks to transcend the alternative between legitimism and revolution through a decision and a concern for the glory of God; this is the keystone of his politics in the second edition of *Romans* as well as, as I shall discuss below, in *Theological Existence Today!*. This emphasis seeks to preserve the God-given nature of social ordinances and by doing so defies the titanism of the Bolshevik; at the same time, and for the same reasons, it defies the titanism of the reactionary that would erect (for instance) the *Staat* and the *Volk* above God. Hence, against both kinds of titanism, left-wing and right-wing, Barth argues

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁰ K. Barth, *Jesus Christus und die soziale Bewegung*, quoted in: S. Park, *Politische Theologie bei Karl Barth*, p. 16.

⁷¹ D.J. Cremer, “Protestant Theology in Early Weimar Germany”, p. 296.

⁷² K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 477.

for a human not-doing⁷³: revolutionaries should not break the God-given ordinances; reactionaries should not elevate them to the rank of their Creator. Both should bow to God’s glory and the “order of the Coming World”.

In the light of Barth’s commentary of Romans 13 we can already appreciate how Schmitt’s accusation of political aloofness is badly misplaced. To take a stance in favor of the glory of God implies a political decision against both legitimists and revolutionaries, who come to be implicitly defined as enemies of God and of the church. If this can be described as political neutrality, it is definitely not the kind of negative political neutrality described by Schmitt in the *Guardian of the Constitution*. As a matter of fact, in the same work he also outlines a positive notion of neutrality as something conducive to a political decision. This kind of neutrality is an attitude of objectivity towards opposing alternatives, in the face of which he who is neutral is capable of taking a stance. For instance, a judge should be neutral or objective towards the warring parts that he must judge. Nonetheless, it is precisely this quality that will allow him to fulfill his duty⁷⁴. I hold that this kind of neutrality is exactly what is at stake in Barth’s discussion of Paul’s epistle. His theology does not teach a neutrality that implies passivity towards the alternatives of revolution and reaction; rather, it teaches the neutrality of God’s servant, who is animated by his love for the glory of God and by the necessity of protecting the divinely instituted social ordinances. This

⁷³ Here, we can see an interesting echo of the Pauline $\acute{\omega}\varsigma\ \mu\eta\ \tau\omicron\upsilon$ of 1 Cor. 7:29-31; for recent discussions of this theme that are relevant to the present topic, see: J. Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*; G. Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. by Patricia Dailey, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2005; G. van Kooten, “Paul’s Stoic Onto-Theology and Ethics of Good, Evil and Indifferents: A Response to Anti-Metaphysical and Nihilistic Readings of Paul in Modern Philosophy”, in: G.J. van der Heiden *et al.* (eds.), *Saint Paul and Philosophy: The Consonance of Ancient and Modern Thought*, De Gruyter, Berlin 2017, pp. 133-164; at any rate, it should be clear how this not-doing does not amount to passivity, but to what has been described in a different context as an experience “of heightened ethical intensity and saturation”; cf. M. Benussi, “Emancipating Ethics: an Autonomist Reading of Islamic Forms of Life in Russia”, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 28(2021), pp. 30-51 (40).

⁷⁴ Cf. M. Nicoletti, *Trascendenza e Potere*, pp. 363ff.

should make the servant capable of taking a political decision in favor of the glory of God; this same decision also implies the neutrality of the judge that declares his sentence and bellicosity against both revolution and reaction.

Lastly, the stance promoted by Barth comes with certain theologico-political implications. Specifically, the ordinances of politics, law and the concepts that they express, are understood as something that looks up to and reflects a divine and transcendent reality – the “order of the coming world”. This does not mean that Barth hopes for the establishment of a theocratic political order: rather, he sees the latter as a sphere of objectivity that takes its cue from divine revelation, therefore discovering itself thoroughly secular *precisely insofar as it is God-given*. For the very same reason, the political order finds itself to be something intrinsic to the human condition and worth defending. Thus, politics and law find in theology the reasons for their worldliness and dependence on God, as well as the reasons for their worth and coherence. Finally, they find in theology a definition of their goals, and a foundation for their right to resist sacralization and theocratic attempts to overtake them. As we shall see, all of these elements emerge once again in *Theological Existence Today!*, with specific reference to the political issues raised by the German Christians.

4. Theological Existence Today!

Theological Existence Today! was written by Karl Barth while he was a professor at the University of Bonn. It was rapidly composed at the behest of Barth’s friends, who urged him to take a public stand against the Nazification of the Evangelical Church. The text was published on the 1st of July 1933, and more than 37000 copies were distributed before its

confiscation by Gestapo in the following year⁷⁵. In the beginning of his manifesto, Barth clarifies what will be the tone of his discussion of the issues raised by the advances of the German Christians:

the essence of what I attempt to contribute to-day bearing upon these anxieties and problems cannot be made the theme of a particular manifesto, for the simple reason that at Bonn here, with my students in lectures and courses, I endeavor to carry on theology, and only theology, now as previously, and as if nothing had happened⁷⁶.

Here, Barth is alluding to the recent reshuffling of the church’s top ranks in favor of the German Christians, as well as their takeover of the Central Church Press Bureau in Berlin. In particular, he is making reference to the fact that Friedrich von Bodelschwing, who had managed to steal the post of *Reichsbischof* away from the Nazis’ candidate Ludwig Müller, had been forced to resign due to the political pressure exerted on him⁷⁷. Therefore, not only the German Christians had redesigned the structure of the German Protestant Church, but they were also tightening their grip on its institutions.

On a superficial reading, the opening page of *Theological Existence Today!* seems to simply amount to Barth’s opting out of politics – and therefore to his offering his flanks to the accusations raised by Schmitt in the following year. However, this first impression is nuanced by what follows. Commenting on his undeterred continuance of his professorial tasks in Bonn, Barth remarks:

⁷⁵ M.M. Solberg, *A Church Undone: Documents from the German Christian Faith Movement, 1932-40*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 2015, p. 81.

⁷⁶ K. Barth, *Theological Existence To-Day!*, trans. by R. B. Hoyle, Wipf and Stock, Eugene 2012, pp. 9-10.

⁷⁷ *Ibi*, see ed. note on p. 11.

Perhaps we find there is a slightly increased tone, but without direct allusions: something like the chanting of the hours by the Benedictines nearby at the *Maria Laach* abbey, which goes on undoubtedly without break or interruption, pursuing the even tenor of its way even in the Third Reich⁷⁸.

In order to understand the weight of this reference to the Benedictine abbey of *Maria Laach*, we need to take into consideration how at the time in which Barth was writing, the latter was becoming a hotspot for right-wing Catholic support of Nazism⁷⁹. Hence, by mentioning it Barth was defiantly asserting that he was behaving just like the Benedictines in *Maria Laach* (who had, politically speaking, the wind at their back) in spite of the present situation. In other words, he was claiming that nothing ought to deter him from teaching theology at Bonn with the same unwavering stance of those Christians who approved Germany's new political scenario. If anything, this had to be done in an "increased tone", insofar as proper theology was now more necessary than ever. Therefore, in *Theological Existence Today!* Barth was all but opting out of politics: he was rather challenging the regime and its supporters on the ground of his role as a theologian of the Church.

His words did not fail to cause an immediate reaction. At the time, the abbot of *Maria Laach* was Ildefons Herwegen, one of the leading figures in German Catholic theology as well as one of the key proponents of the Liturgical Movement. In July of 1933, that is, in the weeks following the publication of *Theological Existence Today!*, the third special sociological conference of the Catholic Association of Academics in Germany took place at the abbey⁸⁰. In this occasion Herwegen claimed that

⁷⁸ *Ibi*, pp. 9-10.

⁷⁹ A. Marcel, *Die Benediktinerabtei Maria Laach und der Nationalsozialismus*, Schönningh Verlag, Paderborn 2004; cf. also L.E. Jones, "Franz von Papen, Catholic Conservatives, and the Establishment of the Third Reich, 1933-34", *The Journal of Modern History* 83(2011), pp. 272-318;

⁸⁰ L.E. Jones, *Franz von Papen*, p. 296.

what the liturgical movement is in the religious field is fascism in the political field – the German person stands and acts under authority, under leadership [...]. Those who do not follow are a pest for the community [...]. Let us say an unreserved yes to the new structure of the total state, which is thought to be entirely analogous to the structure of the church. The Church is in politics in the world like Germany today⁸¹.

Arguably, these comments were aimed, at least in part, at Barth and his successful pamphlet. It must also be added that Carl Schmitt was attending the conference as one of the speakers⁸².

Going back to the text of *Theological Existence Today!*, Barth seemed to be conscious of the political repercussion of his words. In concluding the passage previously quoted he claims that he regards “the pursuit of theology as the proper attitude to adopt [towards the present situation]: at any rate it is one befitting Church-politics, and, indirectly, even politics”⁸³. Therefore, we see how the initial impression, that is, that *Theological Existence Today!* is indeed preaching a stance of political neutrality understood *as passivity* and retreat is not only nuanced by Barth’s reference to *Maria Laach* but is directly refuted by his lastclaim: theology and theological criticism of ecclesiastical politics is the church’s task and Barth intends to accomplish it; furthermore, he argues that such a task has an indirect relationship and effect on politics at large. Just what kind of relationship is this, this is something that emerges over the course of Barth’s argument.

In particular, we should notice how, in order to erect a theological bulwark against the Nazification of the Evangelical Church, Barth decides to focus on the recent dispute concerning the figure of the bishop⁸⁴. Won-

⁸¹ Quoted in T. Ruster, *The Lost Usefulness of Religion: Catholicism and modernity in the Weimar Republic*, Schöningh Verlag, Paderborn 2004, p. 105.

⁸² M.E. Ruff, “Book Review of Maria Laach und der Nationalsozialismus, *Arbeitsgemeinschaft kirchlicher Zeitgeschichtler* 6(2006), (available in “June 2006 Newsletter – Contemporary Church History Quarterly” consulted on-line 27.5.2023, <https://contemporarychurchhistory.org/2006/06/june-2006-newsletter/>).

⁸³ K. Barth, *Theological Existence To-Day!*, pp. 9-10.

⁸⁴ *Ibi*, pp. 30-1.

dering where the urge for instituting a bishop for every State Church and for having all of them gathered under the single leadership of a *Reichsbischof* comes from⁸⁵, Barth argues that “the whole of the business about the 1933 Bishop-question is beyond a doubt a copying of a definite ‘Government pattern’”⁸⁶. In other words, he believes that the Protestant Christians pushing for reforming the Evangelical Church along episcopal lines wanted in fact to replicate the Nazi model of leadership. Of course, an array of reasons was put forward by the reforming party in order to justify the institution of bishops. However, Barth argues that eventually it all boiled down to the fact that people supporting this reform wanted to extend to the church the *Führerprinzip* that proved to be so efficiently applied in the sphere of the state⁸⁷. Even more grotesquely, these bishops, and in particular the supreme *Reichsbischof*, were elected “without having previously *defined*, at least doctrinally and in order according to Church law, what is intended and expected of such a Bishop”⁸⁸.

These claims should be read against the background of Barth’s commentary of Romans 13. In the light of the latter, the church reform pushed by the German Christians should be understood as an undue application of the State’s own answer to the question “what shall we do?”. In the Germany of 1933 this answer consisted in a strong authoritarian leadership and a state organized around Adolf Hitler and the National-Socialist Party. The stamping of this answer on the church constituted, in the terms of *The Epistle to the Romans*, an offense against the honor of God; this followed, insofar as to do so implied that a human doctrine such as Nazi ideology was better suited to rule the church than God’s inspired instructions. The German Christians did not even try to account for the fact that, as Barth puts it,

⁸⁵ *Ibi*, p. 31

⁸⁶ *Ibi*, pp. 34-5.

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁸ *Ibi*, pp. 40-1.

the office of Chief Pastor, the sovereignty and authority of Jesus Christ or of the Holy Scriptures, can have its counterpart within the Church only within the ministry of the ordained officers of the separate churches in the Synodal Union, when mutually admonishing, confirming, or disallowing one another, but not in the special office of a bishop ranked in order superior to the officers of the various churches⁸⁹.

In other words, the new bishops were simply elevated above and against the traditional offices of the church and the synodal custom of the Protestant communities, in the same way in which strong and personal leadership replaced assemblies and communal deliberation in Germany at large. No proper theological reasoning was provided to justify this event. Moreover, Barth argues that no such reasoning is actually available to Christians who adhere to Protestant theology⁹⁰. In this respect, he claims that the institution of bishops in the Protestant Church amounted not only to a Nazification but also to a Romanization of German Protestantism: indeed, the new episcopacy was functionally indistinguishable from “the active, strict, Roman Catholic Prelacy” with its “magisterial Bishop, with the episcopal crozier, with which one can smite!”⁹¹. In this respect, it should be noted how Barth is not willing to distinguish between the *Führerprinzip* advocated by the Nazi and the Roman Catholic understanding of ecclesial leadership. This contrasts with Schmitt’s position, who had first formulated his analysis of political theology and political representation before his decision of supporting Hitler.

Understanding the institution of a quasi-Catholic episcopacy as the fruit of the extension of the Nazi *Führerprinzip* to the church, Barth wonders whether this concept would be acceptable if framed differently.

⁸⁹ *Ibi*, pp. 41-2.

⁹⁰ “What the now removed ‘designated *Reichs*-Bishop’, Dr. von Bodelschwing, said and did, during his active period as such [...] was an abrogation and negation of the real Bishop [...] he was an Evangelical Christian and theologian keeping to the Word [and no] authoritarian spiritual leader”, *ibi*, pp. 42ff.

⁹¹ *Ibi*, pp. 34-5.

He claims that “there would only be sense in speaking of it [...] if it were *actually there*”⁹², that is, if there actually was in the church some *Führer* that could be followed by the people of God. If this was the case, the *Führerprinzip* would be an acceptable idea because the church would be called to follow the leader anointed by God for the time. According to Barth, this is what happened during the Reformation with figures such as Luther and Calvin. However, he specifies that the Reformers were not instituted as *Führers* “in virtue of a special office”; rather, they were acknowledged as such within the context of “their usual office as preachers and professors in Wittenberg and Geneva”, and without the necessity of creating new special offices just to suit them. Therefore, remaining preachers and professors, they were granted “to lead very authoritatively, very spiritually but, above all, very really the Church of God”⁹³. Hence, concludes Barth,

were Luther and Calvin with us nowadays, the ‘leadership principle’ would have some meaning, and without the need for creating a special office of Bishop. But there is no sense in first providing and establishing a Church office of leadership in order to put someone into it, trusting that he may be capable of discharging its duties, even though one’s confidence may be ever so well founded. Leadership is only present when it is an *accomplished matter-of-fact*. The *Führer principle* [*Führerprinzip*] talked about is sheer non-sense. Whoever says otherwise does not know what he is talking about⁹⁴.

Elsewhere, Barth expresses the same thought contained within this passage claiming that real leading, “in all spheres where leading comes into consideration”, hence including the leadership of the state, happens as *event*⁹⁵. Read via the lenses of Schmitt’s understanding of political the-

⁹² *Ibi*, pp. 38-9.

⁹³ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁵ *Ibi*, p. 37.

ology, this amounts to say that political representation is possible only in the *event* of the presence of a personality capable of fulfilling the role of the political representative. The existence of such a person cannot be simply mandated by the establishment of the *institution* of the political representative.

In conclusion, the overall political thrust of *Theological Existence Today!* is clear: to exist theologically in Germany in the July of ’33 calls for taking a stand in favor of the honor of God and against the Nazi regime and its offshoots in the church. Accordingly, Barth’s booklet is no legitimist call in favor of the old order, no revolutionary call to action, but a theologically-powered proclamation meant to rebuke Hitler’s move against God’s ordinances.

5. Conclusion

In terms of theology and church politics, in *Theological Existence Today!* Barth is pulling the rug from under the German Christians’ feet. Exposing the recent reform of the Evangelical church as nothing but a theologically unjustified innovation hushed in by a rush of political fervor, he is in fact proclaiming a sentence of heresy on their movement. In other words, Barth is *de facto* declaring the German Christians to be enemies of the Evangelical Church. This sentence also implies a drawing of the lines when it comes to the broader political landscape. If the German Christians are in fact imposing on the Evangelical Church a mixture of Nazism and Romanist authoritarianism, their ideological providers must also be considered external allies of the internal enemy – and therefore, enemies themselves. Hence, in line with Barth’s opening of his theological manifesto, while his stance affects church politics directly, it also implies the indirect establishment of a certain relationship with politics at large. Finally, as it comes to the politico-theological implica-

tions of his position, we should notice how Barth is explicitly rejecting the idea that the church should shape its law and doctrine after those of the state. Instead, by suggesting that leadership “in all spheres where leading comes into consideration”⁹⁶ should be managed after the example of the Reformers – who, in spite of being true leaders never exceeded their “normal” offices nor tried to reshape them in their image – Barth is in fact claiming that it is the state that should be inspired by the church’s mores. In other words, a country that aims to accommodate both great leaders and correct ruling should solve the problem of political unity and political representation by following the example and models of the Protestant church.

Finally, on all levels of criticism, Barth is attacking Hitler’s takeover of the Weimar republic and the Nazi efforts at reshaping German society. Ultimately, Schmitt’s depiction of Barth as somebody aloof from politics and incapable of taking political decisions only made sense from the point of view of the very opposite choice made by Schmitt himself. In other words, to the eyes of somebody who had thrown his lot with the Nazis, Barth could only be recognized as the enemy and the defender of a failed political order. And yet, Schmitt is the same person who in 1917, showing a logic that closely resembles Barth’s commentary of Romans 13, could write the following words: “if a Christian obeys authority because it is grounded in and bound by God, he obeys God and not authority. This is the only revolution in world history that deserves to be called great – Christianity provided a new foundation for mundane”⁹⁷. There was then a time when Schmitt was worried with the honor of God and sought in the Christian’s allegiance to the established authorities an extension of his faith. And yet, it came a time when the German jurist

⁹⁶ *Ibi*, p. 37.

⁹⁷ C. Schmitt, “The Visibility of the Church”, in: id. *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, p. 51.

fell, together with many among other German Catholics and Protestants, for the idolatry of the Nazi state.