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MODELS OF SOVEREIGNTY AND CIVIL RELIGIONS
A possible dialogue between the writings of Erik Peterson and Eastern Orthodox theologians

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Abstract. *My paper focuses on Erik Peterson's contribution to the classical debate on political theology, especially on his description of models of sovereignty: the divine monarchy model, the King of Persia Model, and the angels of the nations' model, which form the basis of the Eusebian civil theology. Considering these models initially, I suggest a possible subsequent dialogue between Erik Peterson's writings and Eastern Orthodox theology. Peterson's focus on eschatology, ecclesiology, liturgy, and the Church Fathers makes his work relevant for the Orthodox tradition. In addition, his work critically confronts the frameworks of imperialism and nationalism, which represent the principal challenge for the Orthodox space. To a limited extent this discussion has already started, such as in the work of Cyril Hovorun, Pantelis Kalaitzidis or Christos Yannaras. However, a closer look into Peterson's theological reflections, especially his deconstruction of the Eusebian model of symphonia based on a dogmatic reasoning, deserves further consideration. A critical assessment of the way religious language is used to construct models of sovereignty – first in the Hellenistic world, then later in the Roman Empire – lies at the heart of Peterson's research. Questions of analogy and order and how religious narratives contribute to maintaining social bonding within a community, and thus the status quo, are central aspects of his work. Hence, engaging with Peterson's ideas can provide useful insights for Orthodox theologians, who critically assess theological images and language adopted with respect to political realities.*

Keywords. *Erik Peterson; Eusebius of Caesarea; Civil Theology; Civil religion; Sovereignty*

1. *Introduction: From* Theologia civilis *to Civil Religion*

As a scholar and an erudite, Erik Peterson[1], historian of Late Antiquity, New Testament exegete, and enthusiast of Christian archeology, contests Carl Schmitt's perspective on secularization. Peterson's account focuses on inverting Schmitt's theory[2] , who assumed that "all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts"[3]. Peterson underlines that important concepts used by early Christians, such us *martyrion*, *leitourgia, ekklesia,* and even *basileia* – transformed into *basileia tou theou* (Kingdom of God) – are political concepts used by Christians to construct a theological language[4]. His account on the original usage of these concepts is subversive; adopting political images, yet attributing a differing spiritual meaning unto them means that original Christian language emphasizes a counter-political theology. Christ is portrayed as a counter-image to the emperor to suggest that a different way of life is possible: a life in which the eschatological hope for the Kingdom contrasts all empires of this world[5]. There-

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[1] See the monumental work of B. Nichtweiß, *Erik Peterson, Neue Sicht auf Leben und Werk*, Herder, Freiburg am Breisgau, 1994, and G. Caronello (ed.), *Erik Peterson. La presenza teologica di un "outsider"*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 2012, or P. Büttgen - A. Rauwel (eds.) *Théologie politique et sciences sociales*, Ehess Editions, Paris 2019.

[2] On this debate M. Nicoletti, "Erik Peterson e Carl Schmitt. Ripensare un dibattito", in: G. Caronello (ed.), *Erik Peterson. La presenza teologica di un "outsider"*, pp. 517-537, M. Nicoletti, *Trascendenza e Potere, La Teologia Politica di Carl Schmitt,* Istituto di Scienze Religiose in Trento, Brescia, 1990, pp. 415-427, M. Rizzi, "'Nel frattempo...' Osservazioni diverse su genesi e vicenda del 'Monotheismus als politisches Problem' di Erik Peterson", in: P. Bettiolo - G. Filoramo (ed.), *Il Dio mortale. Teologie politiche tra antico e contemporaneo*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2002, pp. 397-423, B. Nichtweiß, "Vedere il nuovo attraverso la rottura, Quattro miniature come introduzione al pensiero di Erik Peterson", in G. Garonello (ed.), *Erik Peterson, La presenza teologica di un "outsider"*, pp. 71-101.

[3] C. Schmitt, *Political Theology, Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty,* ed. and trans. by G. Schwab, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2005, p. 5.

[4] M. Pancheri, *Pensare "ai margini". Escatologia, ecclesiologia e politica nell'itinerario di Erik Peterson*, Università degli Studi di Trento, Trento 2013, pp. 274-279, see also B. Nichtweiß, *Erik Peterson, Neue Sicht auf Leben und Werk*, p. 793, 795.

[5] E. Peterson, "Christ as Imperator", in id., *Theological Tractates,* ed. and trans. by M.J. Hollerich, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2011, pp. 143-150, p. 147.

fore, as a witness to another way of life, as witnesses of Christ, and of his eschatological promises, Christians cannot engage in the cult or the emperor[6].

Yet, both Schmitt and Peterson agree on the analogy between religious and political. It is this analogy that served as a basis for what was called by the ancients *theologia civile,* and by modern scholars, *civil religion*. The ancient sense goes back as far as Varro (116–27 B.C.), who was commented on by Saint Augustine[7], and it refers to the public worship of the gods of nations which was ensured by all ancient cities. One of the main functions of this public service of the gods of the cities was to offer social cohesion. Based on this function of unifying the community, the terms "political religions" and "secular religions", in modern times respectively shaped by Eric Voegelin[8] and Raymond Aron[9], point to political organization. Characteristically, these terms imply the replacement of the redemptive narrative of traditional religion by modern ideological substitutes, which would develop their own redemptive vision. Still, they also imply continuity with the ancient civil theology as the work of Voegelin makes clear. As a scholar of Late Antiquity, for Peterson, *theologia civile* is the *forma mentis* of Hellenistic thinkers. As a theologian, the same Peterson argues that Christianity reshaped the standard ancient understanding about what a religion is and its function. Indeed, early Christian authors distinguished their new faith from the old form of religiosity, and one of the main aspects of this new faith aimed at crit-

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[6] An essential article to understand Peterson's alternative to political theology is E. Peterson, "Witness to the Truth", in id., *Theological tractates*, pp. 151-183. See also the introduction to the French translation by D. Rance in id., *Témoin de la verité*, Ad Solem, Gènève 2015, pp. 7-74.

[7] St. Augustine, *The City of God*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody 2009, Book VI, chapter 5.

[8] Erik Voegelin, *Die politischen Religionen*, Bermann-Fischer Verlag, Stockholm 1939. See also E. Gentile*, Le religioni della politica, Fra democrazie e totalitarismi*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2007.

[9] R. Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, Doubleday, New York 1957, p. 109, p. 286, is important to emphasize the contribution of this debate of the Russian theologian N. Berdyaev who already from 1935 noticed an opposition and analogy between Marxism and Christianity, see N. Berdyaev, "Marxism and the Conception of Personality", *Christendom* 5, 2(1935): 251–62.

icizing the political dimension of religion. Thus, Peterson invites a reflection on how Hellenistic religious narratives contributed to construct models of sovereignty. Although Christ's statement "My Kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36), should imply the eschatological proviso[10], some Christian authors like Eusebius continued using these ancient models of sovereignty, and thereby even distorted Christian teachings to better fit into the inherited sovereignty framework. Reading this debate in the context of Schmitt's adherence to Nationalism Socialism, one can realize some convergencies between the ancient usage of religion as *theologia civile,* and the modern usage as civil religion, whereas both focus on an instrumentalization and subordination of religious piety to the political project.

The aim of this article is to open a possible dialogue between the writings of Erik Peterson and Eastern Orthodox theology. To a limited extent this discussion has already started, as I will show in the second part of the article. Additionally, a closer look into Peterson's theological reflections, especially his deconstruction of the Eusebian sovereign model, based on dogmatic reason extracted from the Church Fathers, deserve further consideration. It might seem counterintuitive that a Protestant converted to Catholicism has something to add to the current discussion in Orthodox theology, but the parallel between Erik Peterson's criticism of *Deutsche Christen*[11] which supported National Socialism and today's criticism of the Russian world ideology offered by Eastern Orthodox theologians is striking. What is more, due to the 17th century *cuius regio eius religio* norm, Protestants developed a territorial imagination about faith[12], similar in practice to the Orthodox idea of canonical territory[13].

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[10] See G. Uribbari, "La riserva escatologica, genesi del concetto in Erik Peterson", *PATH* 12(2013), pp. 273-313 (consulted online 15.01.2022, https://repositorio.comillas.edu/rest/bitstreams/24954/retrieve).

[11] See on this N. Tenaillon, "Peterson et le recours à la théologie politique", *Laval théologique et philosophique* 63, 2(2007), pp. 245-257.

[12] L. Field, "Nota editoriale di Erik Peterson 'Il Problema del nazionalismo nel cristianesimo antico'", in: id., *Chiesa antica, giudaismo e gnosi*, Paideia Editrice, Brescia 1959, new edition 2021, p. 190

[13] J. Oeldemann, "The Concept of Canonical Territory in the Russian Orthodox Church", in: T. Bremer,

Therefore, both take the risk of sacralizing the local realities and conflate national and religious identity. Furthermore, as a young German man, Peterson fought for some months in World War One. This experience inspired him to write a beautiful pacificist text[14]. Later, in the 1930s, he faced the nationalism, racism, and imperialism of his home country. Reading between the lines of his exegesis of early Christians texts, one can see the premise of a theology of resistance rooted in the eschatological expectation[15]. Speaking about how the questions of sovereignty and the diversity of nations and languages has been treated in Late Antiquity, he notes: "the way these problems have been treated in the past, can offer us a new way to address current problems"[16]. The following part of the study will explore some lines of argumentations from *Monotheism as a Political Problem*[17] (1935) and from *Problem of Nationalism in Early Christianity* (1951), addressing the question of which religious images are being used to illustrate plurality and unity. Divine monarchy, correlating to the universal empire, and the angels of nations, correlating with the expression of ethnic particularity, appeared as models of sovereignty. They express an analogy between the religious and the political language. Both the model of divine monarchy, as well as the one of the angels of the nations, have been used to support and justify a theological foundation of political order. Hence, they represent examples of *theologia civile*.

(ed.) *Religion and the Conceptual Boundary in Central and Eastern Europe. Studies in Central and Eastern Europe*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2008.

[14] E. Peterson, "Le Ciel de l'aumônier militaire", in: id., *En marge de la théologie*, Cerf, Paris 2015, pp. 85-89.

[15] See A. Petrache, "Eschaton's Witness in the Work of Erik Peterson", in: S. van Erp - J. Haers (eds.), *"Theos" and "Polis". Political Theology as Discernment,* Peeters, Leuven (*forthcoming*), pp. 329-343.

[16] E. Peterson, "Il problema del nazionalismo nel cristianesimo antico", in: id., *Chiesa antica, giudaismo e gnosi*, Paideia Editrice, Brescia 2021, pp. 197-209 (209).

[17] E. Peterson, "Der Monotheismus als politisches Problem. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der politischen Theologie im Imperium Romanum (1935)", in: id., *Theologische Traktate*, 1951; id., "Monotheism as a political problem: A contribution to the history of political theology in the Roman Empire", in: id., *Theological Tractates*, pp. 68-105.

2. *The Political Theology of Unity under the shadow of the Empire*

The well-known article *Monotheism* is presenting the historical and theo-philosophical evolution of a sovereignty model, a political order built on a metaphysical fundament. This model evolved throughout centuries, from Aristotle to Eusebius of Caesarea. It developed throughout various cultural and religious backgrounds, always trying to accommodate the desire of unity as manifested through religion and politics. Progressing from the Homeric-Aristotelian, the pseudo-Aristotelian-Hellenistic model, the Jewish Philonian model, to Celsus' polytheist model, culminating with the Eusebian adaption of Christianity, all of these stages were dictated by the intent of unification and universalism. Peterson's analysis is very rich in details and, as Borges would say, only a map on the same scale would suffice. Therefore, my article will point only towards the direction and the purpose of his work. The effort of Peterson was to demonstrate that none of these models are compatible with Christianity. His work consists in rejecting any attempt to "transfer pagan theology's secular monarchy concept to the Trinity"[18].

According to G. Caronello the relevance of Peterson's account comes from his description of monotheism, opposed to trinitarian theology, as the civil theology of the present time[19], a construction promoted by the Enlightenment but strange to the trinitarian Christian narrative. This was possible because the emerging Constantine church developed a *theologia civilis* not faithful enough to Christian teachings[20].

Scholarly contributions emphasize the historical limits of Peterson's account concerning monotheism[21]. Nevertheless, what his studies point out

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[18] E. Peterson, *Monotheism as a political problem*, p. 84.
[19] G. Caronello, "La critica del monoteismo nel primo Peterson", in: P. Bettiolo - G. Filoramo (ed.), *Il Dio mortale. Teologie politiche tra antico e contemporaneo*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2002, p. 353.
[20] *Ibi,* p. 354.
[21] M. Rizzi, *"Nel frattempo..."*, pp. 397-423.

concerning *theologia civil* is still relevant today, as I will demonstrate in the second part of my study. The contemporary relevance of Peterson's work is not from the historical account, but from his argument that power is extracting legitimation from a nonpolitical sphere – from religious, mythological or metaphysical discourses, producing narratives about how to reconcile the plurality of principles acting in the universe. Peterson tackles the question of the fundament of power, describing the *theologia civilis* as serving as a ground for political systems. Several publications[22] engage with his *Monotheism* because of this contribution, explaining the metaphysical connection between the religious and the political realm.

One of the strategies of Peterson is to identify all ancient authors that are quoting the Iliad verse "Beings to do not want to be governed badly, the rule of many is not good, let one be ruler." In Schmittian terms, this verse is well chosen, since it points towards an enemy: the plurality of sovereigns or the plurality of the principles, and its chaotic outcome. Those who use the Homeric rhetoric contributed to the monotheist sovereign model. Indeed, this model of sovereignty stresses the single rule under the category of a divine monarchy. This means that this model is a political and theological model. Peterson shows that the original Aristotelian model based on the hegemony of a single principle, *mia arche*, is "a political metaphor that transcends a merely aesthetic one"[23]. It is a choice for metaphysical unity. This monarchical imagination about God remained dominant for centuries, but there are shifts in the way the royal metaphor is presented. Within the treatise *De Mundo*, "the governance of God is imagined after the manner of the Persian Great King"[24]. Just as the Persian king ruled with the help of his satraps, intermediary

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[22] V. Delecroix, *Apocalypse du politique,* Desclée de Brouwer, Paris 2016, G. Gyorgy, "Political theology versus theological politics: Erik Peterson and Carl Schmitt", *New German Critique* 35, 3(2008), pp. 7-33, M. Borghesi, *Critica della teologia politica. Da Agostino a Peterson: la fine dell'era costantiniana*, Marietti 1820, Bologna 2019.
[23] E. Peterson, *Monotheism as a political problem*, p. 69.
[24] *Ibi*, p.70

principles between God and human beings are introduced here: by polytheists, they were interpreted as inferior deities, whereas Jews identified them as angels.

This is essential, because it permits an adaptation of the polytheistic view to the model of the one sovereign. This can be exemplified with Aelius Aristides and his image of the lordship of Zeus, and also with Celsus and his "highest God who permits the legitimacy of traditional religion of diverse people" who are forced to fit into the monotheist construction of the universe. Thus, Peterson states: "Time and time again it is the same idea *Le roi règne mais ne gouverne pas*, the gods are kings, satraps, viceroys, friends of the king or officials, actual Imperium belongs to the highest God, who is compared to the Roman Emperor and to the Persian kings"[25]. Paradoxically, polytheist religion is forced to enter and support this monotheist model of sovereignty. Furthermore, this Hellenistic adaptation of the model will be the basis of the failed Christian attempt to also force Christianity to fit into this theocivil model. The polytheist version reveals even more the political dimension. Therein many gods participate in the sovereignty of one God. However, they do not overshadow the one God, but as subordinate beings rather confirm his role as a sovereign. Something similar applies to the political dimension. Within the concept of the empire, the plurality of subjected nationalities do not oppose the imperial dimension, but instead confirm its rule. The singular rule of the empire achieves an accommodation of the variety of nations present therein: the Hellenistic, and thereafter the Roman Empire, are examples of the triumph of the Iliad's vision. It is only Israel, because of its radical monotheism and of its idea of one people chosen among all nations, that cannot fit into this model. Therefore, it became an isolated element. However, Philo's version of divine monarchy is rooted in the Hellenistic model discussed above, nevertheless

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[25] *Ibi*, p. 83; for examples see all the end notes from 86 to 90.

because of his exclusive monotheism, his approach focuses more on the special covenant of the Jewish people.

Peterson's account on Philo is ambiguous[26]. Apparently, his main concern is to prove the continuity with the peripatetic model without entering into details on the specificity of the covenant with the people of God. One can only speculate whether this is due to the political context. The fact remains that Peterson is passing from Philo's model as a "politico-theological concept, intended to justify the religious superiority of the Jewish people and their mission to paganism"[27] to the Christian apologetic usage of the same scheme to "justify the superiority of the people of God who assemble in the church of Christ"[28]. The text seems to disagree both with these Jewish and Christians usages of the religious dimension to justify a political position. Additionally, a hint is offered by Peterson's quotation of the *On The Confusion of Tongues*, a treatise in which Philo uses Platonic images to point out that God is surrounded by intermediary powers, who help him to govern the world: "Let us then consider what this is: God, being one, has about him an unspeakable number of powers, all of which are defenders and preservers of everything that is created"[29]. Philo calls these intermediate powers angels, or

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[26] Agamben accused Peterson of antisemitism, G. Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory. For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2011, pp. 14-16; however, this accusation has been deconstructed in C. Schmidt, "The Return of the Katechon: Giorgio Agamben contra Erik Peterson", *The Journal of Religion* 94, 2(2014), pp. 182-203.

[27] E. Peterson, *Monotheism as a political problem*, p. 78.

[28] *Ibidem.*

[29] Philo, *On the Confusion of Tongues*, §. 171 (consulted online 10.01.2023 http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/yonge/book15.html). Here is the full passage: "In the first place, then, we must say this, that there is no existing being equal in honor to God, but there is one only ruler and governor and king, to whom alone it is granted to govern and to arrange the universe. For the verse – A multitude of kings is never good, Let there one sovereign, one sole monarch be, {57}{Iliad 2.204.}" is not more justly said with respect to cities and men than with respect to the world and to God; for it is clear from the necessity of things that there must be one creator, and one father, and one master of the one universe. §XXXIV. This point then being thus granted, it is necessary to convert with it also what follows, so as to adapt it properly. Let us then consider what this is: God, being one, has about him an unspeakable number of powers, all of which are defenders and preservers of everything that is created" (§§. 170-171).

daimons. According to Philo, God as an architect needs these powers to act in the universe. This question of angels is not developed any further in *Monotheism*, however it will be developed after the end of the war, in the 1951 article focusing on the relationships between the people of God and nations. But before addressing the question of angels of the nations, one more step is needed for presenting the Hellenistic version of this model found in writings of Celsus.

In the hierarchy of beings developed by Celsus there are no angels. Nevertheless, the Platonic references allow him to speak of gods of nations, gods of *éthnē* and *poleis* (nations and cities). These gods of nations are caretakers of nations and geniuses of nations. In modern terms, the theory of Celsus is that sovereignty is compatible with subsidiarity, its undivided supremacy is compatible with governing/administrative powers. What is the place of Judaism[30] in his model? In the endnote 112 Peterson notices that Ceslus "has words of recognition for the national character of the Jewish religion. Insofar as Jews adhere to their national worship, they do not act any different from other people". What Peterson is not saying here is that Celsus' strategy to present Jewish heritage as any other national heritage is a way for Celsus to level the specificity of Judaism, and therefore to neutralize the monotheist claim. For Celsus, the Jewish God is like any other god. Nevertheless, in the 1951 article, Peterson will state that rigorous monotheists cannot accept this Hellenistic model reproduced by Celsus[31]. This angelic-satrapic model of sovereignty represents a twist into the unitarian peripatetic model of sovereignty, and this twisted model will be used to support and justify the Roman Empire. Marco Rizzi's reading of the Celsus-Origen debate suggested that Peterson's perspective can be summed up as the impossibility

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[30] See on this M. Rizzi, "Gli angeli delle nazioni nel dibattito tra Celso e Origene", *Politica e Religione* (2008), monographical issue: *Angeli delle Nazioni*, pp. 94-105.
[31] E. Peterson, "Das Problem des Nationalismus im alten Christentum", in: id., *Frühkirche, Jundentum und Gnosis*, Herder, Freiburg im Breisgau 1959, pp. 51-63.

to reduce *ad unum* human experiences in the political realm[32]. Although his interpretation on the work of Origen as non-political is debatable[33], pointing towards the Celsus-Origen debate articulates a theological exit from the civil-theological model, and therefore liberates Christians from national concerns.

What is more, Celsus presents a serious political problem: how can Christians who refuse the given order of the society be trusted as citizens? Christians, who belong to a different kind of polity that is not recognized by the imperial system, and which is not rooted in national identity, represent a *stasis*[34] for the city. *Stasis* represents a division within the sovereignty model, and as a rift it represents the maximum danger for the stability of power – even though the concept cannot be discussed in depth here, this basic notion should be kept in mind.

In his answer to Celsus, Origen offers an eschatological prophecy: "national differences will cease on the last day". So, he is opposing the political model offered by Celsus by a future model of unity. In Origen's approach, not only national differences will cease at the *eschaton*, but they are already smoothed within this time. Smoothing ethnic distinctions is the true revolution of Christianity in the political realm. The Hellenistic attempt to neutralize national differences by granting them the same importance within the empire is contrasted to the Christian's way of neutralizing national difference by proposing a new way of being and belonging to *ekklesial politeia*. In other words, Origen's focus on eschatology in his answer acknowledges that Christians are dangerous for the stability of the city, yet not in the political way expected by Celsus, but by their expectation that structure of powers – be that local or universal – will cease one day under the shadow of the only Kingdom.

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[32] M. Rizzi, "Nel frattempo...", *cit.*, p. 415.
[33] Id., "Gli angeli delle nazioni", *cit.*, and "Nel frattempo...", *cit.*
[34] On the concept of *stasis* see: L. Pellarin, "Erik Peterson e la στάσις: una legittimazione sovversiva della teologia politica" *Humanitas* 76, 3(2021), pp. 445-477.

3. *The Political Theology of Diversity, the shadow of Nationalism*

The same question of nationalism is treated in a different conceptual language in the 1951[35] article *Das Problem des Nationalismus im alten Christentum*. As Sennelart[36] points out, Peterson drafted four versions of the same article. A few months after the first publication, another shortened variant appeared in Hochland[37]. The third version dates to 1952, while the last version was extended in its notes and dates to 1959[38]. I further refer to the Italian translation of this last version[39]. Sennelart's analysis, which also serves as an introduction for the reedition of the French text, focuses on the continuity between the Jewish and the Christian images of angels of nations. It brings the ideas of Peterson into discussion with the work of Jean Danielou.

In Peterson, angels are ensuring the celebration of an eternal liturgy in heaven; as such they have the role of mediation since the church on earth participates in the cult of heaven. A discussion on the functions of angels is both an ecclesiological-liturgical discussion and an eschatological one, and it allows the church to be defined by this participation in the cult of heavenly Jerusalem. Moreover, by this participation in the *ekklesia*, Christians apply for the citizenship of Heaven: "They have drawn near to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to countless angels in solemn assembly and to the ekklesia of the firstborn, who are enrolled in heaven as citizens"[40]. This language of citizenship and assembly are not just metaphors. It also implies that Christians do

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[35] E. Peterson, "Das Problem des Nationalismus im alten Christentum", *Theologische Zeitschrift* 7(1951), pp. 81-91.
[36] M. Senellart, *À propos des anges des nations,* in : P. Büttgen - A. Rauwel, *Théologie politique et sciences sociales. Autour d'Erik Peterson*, Éditions de l'EHESS, Paris, p. 194.
[37] E. Peterson, "*Das Problem des Nationalismus im alten Christentum*", *Hochland* 44(1951-1952), pp. 216-223.
[38] Id., "*Das Problem des Nationalismus im alten Christentum*", in: id., *Frühkirche, Jundentum und Gnosis*, pp. 51-63.
[39] Id., *Il problema del nazionalismo, cit.*
[40] Id., "*Book of Angels*", in: id., *Theological Tractates*, p. 107.

not totally belongs to the earthly *polis,* since "they have no lasting city on earth" (Heb 13:14)[41]. This relativization of earthly citizenship is essential for Peterson, the liturgical function of the church expresses an eschatological reserve. Although the Church is not replacing the political community, it points towards an alternative way to understand the idea of a universal community. By overcoming political identities mostly expressed by ethnic distinction, Christianity presented itself as a new model of universality. Indeed, the Church appears to be a new *oikumene*, and because of this universalist potentiality, it came to be confused with the Empire. Belonging to the Church came to substitute belonging to a certain nation.

In *Das Problem des Nationalismus,* the tension between the plurality of principles acting in the universe, and the one sovereign is expressed in the language of angels serving Christ that can still turn away from their service. According to Peterson, there is an identification between the modern phenomenon of nationalism and the ancient concept of angels of nations[42]. By nationalism, ancient authors understood the communality of language, laws, religion, and customs of a given community. Often this community points to a common ancestor living in the same land. Angels are to be understood as spiritual principles and intermediate powers who administrate the world. They are sent by God, but their power can be corrupted. Early Christians' idea of angels of nations derives from Judaism, as pointed out in Peterson's account on Philo and on his account concerning the Greek translation of Deuteronomy 32:8-9. Nevertheless, this Jewish idea underwent transformation in the Hellenistic period and became influenced by the image of the intermediate powers of satraps, helping the Persian King to govern. According to Peterson, during the Hellenistic period this theory played an ideological

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[41] *Ibidem.*
[42] Id*., Il problema del nazionalismo, cit.*, p. 198.

role in the empire of Alexander, as it tried to neutralize the religious and national differences of the empire. Peterson's interpretation that this theory was shaped to overcome possible conflicts in the empire, has a polemical stance, since it implies that it emerged as a rhetorical strategy. As a mixture between the pagan idea of national gods with the Jewish idea of angels[43], the metaphor of angels of nations represents something like a spiritual principle which organizes a given community. In the line of Origen, Peterson accepted the idea of angels of nations as spiritual principles, linking it with the idea of a soul and spirit of a given nation. However, after the coming of Christ, the power of angels of nations has been limited. It is only in the process of revolt against the sovereignty of Christ that these angels of nations can be seen acting. Although they should be principles of order and unity, these spiritual principles might be corrupted by the divinization of the nations. Even though put into the shadow by the coming of Christ, angels of nations might reappear, and thus, they represent a temptation for the Church. Peterson's account on this topic is covered by Nicoletti, who states that the idea of angels of the nations can only be understood in a nationalistic sense if it is dealing with fallen angels. Nicoletti concludes that "this call upon the angels of the nations suggests a reaffirmation of the limit placed on political sovereignty by the existence of a superior power"[44]. Hence, the nature of angels remains mediatory, and it is only when angels refuse to subordinate themselves to God that the "demonic nature of power"[45] can be seen at work. In modern words, nationalism is a power, but this power has been neutralized by the hegemony of Christ.

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[43] An essential role in shaping the concept of the "angels of nations" and connecting it with linguistic diversity is Philo's work *On the Confusion of Tongue*s, § 170-175. Peterson quotes this text explicitly and underlines Philo's idea of angels/daimon "as servants and minister of the ruler" (*Monotheism as Political Problem*, *cit.*, p. 76).

[44] M. Nicoletti, "The Angels of the Nations", in *Theopopedia. Archiving the History of Theologico-political Concepts*, ed. by T. Faitini, F. Ghia, M. Nicoletti, University of Trento, Trento 2015, p. 10 (consulted on line 21.05.2023, http://theopopedia.lett.unitn.it/?encyclopedia=angels-of-the-nations).

[45] *Ibidem.*

A slightly different approach about the angels of nations can be found in Ratzinger's commentary to the Celsus-Origen debate[46]. Therein, he explicitly rejects Peterson's interpretation, with a letter stating that "angels of the peoples can be viewed both under the aspect of the spirit of the people and under that of the soul of the people"[47]. For Ratzinger, the angels of nations invoked in Origen cannot be good angels, and they are definitively not vehicles of salvation – at least after the coming of Christ, a view which derives from Origen's refusal of Celsus' doctrine concerning Israel. As it has been shown above, Celsus reduced Israel's identity to a national one, while Origen maintained the special religious role of Israel; since Israel was the only nation which remained under the power of God, and not under the power of angels. Ratzinger concluded through Origen's work that Israel was never a nation, "but rather the only part of humanity that had not fallen into the prison of national identity"[48]. Thus, the angels of nations remain usurpers and symbols of disorder, and Christ's redemptive work brought about the overcoming of the power of angels.

Furthermore, Ratzinger's exegesis on the unity of the nations, which begins with Peterson's analysis on *Das Problem des Nationalismus*, can help us better understand what is at stake with this question of overcoming nationalism in the ancient world. Ratzinger proposes two ways in which national differences can be overcome: the first is the attempt of the Roman Empire, which tried to extend its rule over all nations, and in this process, it would provide unity. However, the second is the attempt to transcend national differences by baptism in the church, two *oikumenical* projects that confront each other[49].

As for Peterson, this confrontation is clear in his view. Departing

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[46] J. Ratzinger, *The Unity of the Nations. A Vision of the Church Fathers*, trans. by B. Ramsey, Catholic University of America Press, Washington 2015, p. 44
[47] E. Peterson, *Il problema del nazionalismo*, *cit.*, p. 202.
[48] J. Ratzinger, *The Unity of the Nations*, *cit.*, p. 39.
[49] *Ibi*, pp. 12-15, p. 106-111.

from this fundamental observation is why he put so much effort in criticizing Eusebius of Caesarea. The latter engages uncritically with pagan structures to legitimate the power of the emperor. It is not possible to enter the details within the context of Peterson's criticism on the realized eschatology, and of the confusion between *Pax Romana* and *Pax Christi* presented in *Monotheism*.[50] Nevertheless, is important for our topic to underline that the cessation of national differences is also the kernel of Peterson's argument against Eusebius. For Peterson, the Eusebian account represents the climax of models of sovereignty wherein "monotheism is the metaphysically corollary of the Roman Empire which dissolves nationalities"[51]. The association between the Roman Empire and the divine monarchy appeared in the context of the supposition of cessations of both polytheism and polyarchies. Eusebius opposes the hegemony of the Roman Empire with national pluralism and presents this hegemony as the implementation of the doctrine of divine monarchy. According to Peterson, the doctrine of the divine monarchy is the foundation of the Eusebian account on politics. At the core of this model of sovereignty lies the analogy according to which Constantine imitates divine monarchy in his earthly rule: "in his own monarchy, he imitated the Divine Monarchy, the *one* king on Earth corresponds to the *one* God, the *one* King in Heaven and the royal Nomos and Logos"[52]. But a novel element also appears here: it is the question of providence, or in Peterson's terms "theological construction of history"[53]. Within this new paradigm, events in history can be read as fulfilling the will of God.

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[50] See R. Farina, *L'impero e l'imperatore cristiano in Eusebio di Cesarea: la prima teologia politica del cristianesimo*, Pas Verlag, Zurich, 1966, and S. Runciman, *The Byzantine Theocracy,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge-New York 1977, and for the limits of this interpretation M. Hollerich, "Religion and politics in the writings of Eusebius: Reassessing the first 'Court Theologian'", *Church History* 59, 3(1990), pp. 309-325 and K. Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ,* SCM Press, London 1987.
[51] E. Peterson, *Monotheism as a political problem*, p. 94.
[52] *Ibi*, p. 94.
[53] *Ibi*, p. 97.

Hence, as a church historian Eusebius can choose which events allegedly fit into God's plan. Indeed, this messianic reading of history is the most powerful imaginable legitimation mechanism. Herein, sacred and political history are bound together in a narrative which speaks about the birth of Christ within the Roman Empire. To summarize, it is a model of unity "fashioned by Christians [...] linking empire, peace, monotheism and monarchy"[54]. The logic of this model consists in choosing between events in history which endorse unity at the religious and political level. Therefore, national "sovereignty is allied intimately with polytheism" and contrasted with the universal monotheist empire. After engaging with the legacy of Eusebius in the writings of Prudentius, Ambrose, Jerome, and Orosius, Peterson comments that one fundamental aspect that these polished models of sovereignty have forgotten: Christian Trinitarian dogma cannot be reduced to the monotheistic narrative developed in Eusebius[55]. Finally, within Peterson's last pages of *Monotheism,* he contrasts the Trinitarian framework with all attempts of formulating analogies with the created order, and thereby refuses monotheism as piece of *Reichspolitik*.[56]

To sum up, we had presented some steps in the construction of a model of sovereignty. In their different nuances one can distinguish between the divine monarchy, the monotheist model, the King of Persia model, and the angels of the nations model. Yet, all of them point towards a model of indivisible sovereignty on the political level, based on a religious image of unity. Hence, all of them represent forms of *theologia civilis* and are important, according to Peterson, because they laid the foundation for the Eusebian civil theology. The Church's habit of endorsing power comes from this historical heritage. Therefore, the first

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[54] *Ibi*, p. 96.
[55] *Ibi*, p. 102.
[56] *Ibidem*.

step to become free from this heritage is to acknowledge the contrast with the original Christians' message. This incompatibility is also presented and discussed in detail in other of Peterson's texts, for example in *Witness to the Truth* or *Christ as Emperor*. By comprehending and critically reflect upon these models of sovereignty, it shall become clear how they have been used continually in various contexts to build (un-) orthodox political theologies.

4. *The shadow of Eusebius: Reception of Peterson's work in the Orthodox Milieu*

In this paper's last part, I focus on examples from Eastern Orthodoxy, in which religion and politics are intertwined. Hereby, we can see how Peterson's criticism of Christianity as being reduced to a civil religion is still valid. However, in countering Orthodox uncritical support for the empire and nation, some critical theological voices appeared[57]. Some of these voices, representing a theological shift, referred directly to Peterson, while other authors do not refer to Peterson explicitly, yet have similar theological features. Let us consider the following account on the unity of the Church and the Empire of Patriarch Anthony of Constantinople provided within on article of John Meyendorff.

> Patriarch Anthony (1389-1390,1391-1397) was asked by the Great Prince of Moscow Basil I whether the commemoration of the Byzantine emperor's name could be dropped at liturgical service in Russia. 'My son' the patriarch answered, 'you are wrong in saying: We have a church but no emperor. It is not possible for

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[57] For a comprehensive approach on this topic see K. Stoeckl - G. Ingeborg - A. Papanikolaou (eds.). *Political Theologies in Orthodox Christianity: Common Challenges-Divergent Positions*, Bloomsbury, London 2017.

Christians to have a church and not to have an empire. Church and empire have a great unity and community, nor is it possible for them to be separated from one another'[58].

This quotation expresses exactly what Peterson named the theopolitical problem of monotheism serving as civil religion. Meyendorff's article focusing on the connection between eschatology and social responsibility, recognized a certain "ambiguity" in the way the "Byzantine experiment addressed the question of harmony". He stresses that therein the Church maintained the distinction between empire and religion and did not actually believe in realized eschatology. Yet, in my view, he is not critical enough with the issue of the empire. Speaking about Tsarist Russia, he stresses that the empire adopted a secular western model and only a Byzantine facade. Although Meyendorff is critical concerning the nationalist temptation, recognizing it as a weakness of Orthodoxy, he is comparing the failure of nationalism with the Byzantine empire. Religious nationalism represents for him a "capitulation before a subtle form of secularism, which Byzantium with its universal idea of the empire always avoided"[59]. He fails to see that the Church's empowering of nationalism is just a stone's throw away from local states substituting the empire. The form of the state is less important than the *symphonia* principle. Menyendorff is a renowned theologian and historian, yet his insufficient criticism of the empire signifies the obsessive desire of unity with the political realm, often uncritically present within the Orthodox milieu. However, this desire for unity eventually is challenged by some contemporary Orthodox theologians. Moreover, some of these theologians draw on Peterson's perspective and its eschatological categories with their works.

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[58] E. Barker, *Social and Political Thought in Byzantium,* Clarendon Press, Oxford 1975, p. 195 quoted in: J. Meyendorff, "The Christian Gospel and Social Responsibility: The Eastern Orthodox Tradition in History", in: F. Forrester Church - T. Francis George (eds.), *Continuity and Discontinuity in Church History*, Brill, Leiden 1979, pp. 118-130.
[59] J. Meyendorff, *The Christian Gospel and Social Responsibility*, p. 200.

Just like Peterson, the Greek theologian Christos Yannaras criticizes in his book *Against religion* the process that transforms Christianity into a *religio imperii*[60], which offers the political unity of the empire and even offers "new metaphysical understanding of politics"[61]. Also, for Yannaras, the turning point was represented by Constantine. He named the process begun by the emperor a "religionalization of the ecclesial event"[62]. By this expression, he understands the transformation of the eucharistic community into a binding religion, ensuring political unity by common worship. Christianity comes to play the same role as the ancient civil religion of the empire, which offered worship to the gods of Rome. Critical to this transformation, Yannaras sees alienation and individualization as consequence to this religionalization, while the church is transformed into a bureaucratic institution serving the common good. Furthermore, he emphasizes that the Orthodox. Christian community turned "the catholicity of every local church into an absolute, let themselves slide into the affirmation in practice of ethnophiles, [...] and reconciling themselves to the role of a state religion"[63]. This means that it is not the national or the imperial forms that are problematic for Yannaras, but any attempt of the Church to legitimize a political order, and therefore to reduce Christianity to a civil religion.

While Yanarras himself does not refer to Peterson's works, there is a scholarly attempt to discuss Peterson's ecclesiology along with the one of Yannaras. The essay of Pavlo Smytsnyuk[64] elaborates how both theologians define the church in relationship with the *polis*. This dis-

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[60] C. Yannaras, *Against Religion,* Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline 2013 p. 135-144, the Greek version is from 2006. On Yanarras see also P. Smytsnyuk, "The Politicization of God: Soloviev, Clément and Yannaras on the Theological Importance of Atheism", *ET-Studies* 13, 2(2022), pp. 265-288.

[61] C. Yannaras, *Against Religion*, p. 138.

[62] *Ibi*, p. 139.

[63] *Ibi*, p. 141.

[64] P. Smytsnyuk, "A Tortuous Boundary: Polis, Civil Religion, and the Distinction between the Sacred and Profane", in: A. Bodrov - S. M. Garrett (eds.), *Theology and the Political*, Brill, Leiden 2020, pp. 106-127.

cussion points towards the notion of civil religion and how both authors have been criticizing the Church for adopting political aims. Pavlo Smytsnyuk carefully elaborates both similarities concerning the nature of the *ekklesia* and dissimilarities concerning the nature of the political within the works of the Greek and German theologians. Although Yannaras' account on modernity and human rights is highly problematic[65], his distinction between "ecclesiastical event" and church as institution helps advance the discussion on civil religion in the orthodox space.

In line with Peterson's work, Cyril Hovorun, a contemporary Ukrainian theologian, uses the category of civil religion to explain phenomena like the "Russian world", and the Balkanic style of nationalism[66]. His work explains how the churches themselves contributed to this construction to ensure social and political benefits. One of the key processes in this civil religion is the Byzantine model of *symphonia*, in which Church and state mutually legitimize one another. In his explanation of the notion of civil religion, Hovorun refers to the Schmitt-Peterson debate[67]. What is more, he reiterates Peterson's particular argument that only by reducing Christianity to deism, a theological-political problem might arise: "Civil

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[65] See on this I. Kaminis, "The Reception of Human Rights in the Eastern Orthodox Theology: Challenges and Perspectives", in: H.-P. Grosshans - P. Kalaitzidis, *Politics, Society and Culture in Orthodox Theology in a Global Age*, Brill-Schöningh, Leiden 2022 (consulted online 10.12.2022, https://brill.com/edcollchap-oa/book/9783657793792/BP000022.xml).

[66] C. Hovorun, "Civil Religion in the Orthodox Milieu", in: K. Stoeckl - G. Ingeborg - A. Papanikolaou (eds.), *Political Theologies in Orthodox Christianity*, pp. 253-262, in particular p. 253. Describing the different orthodox churches in Ukraine, Hovorun is using the imperial versus the national paradigm developed by Peterson. He claims: "The divisions between the Orthodox Churches in Ukraine exists because the divided churches associate themselves with the opposed civil religions. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate largely embraces the Russian imperial paradigm, while the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Patriarchate of Kiev and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church rely on the nation-based civil religion. It seems that a reconciliation between the Ukrainian churches is impossible until they distance themselves from the civil religions they support" (*ibi*, p. 259).

[67] Id., *Politicization of Religion: Eastern Christian Case*, keynote lecture held at the "European Academy of Religion Conference" (Bologna, 22-25.06.2020) available on-line here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=88qNf3LE8tM&t=5s (consulted on 18.01.2022). This lecture is particularly interesting because it traces a line from the Schmitt-Peterson debate until today's attempts to use Christian ideas to legitimize political struggles.

religions tend to reduce the Trinitarian or Christological languages to the Unitarian language of one powerful God"[68]. Like Peterson, his work also has an ecclesiological dimension. Hovorun's theological project consists of criticizing the ideological narratives embedded within the structures of the Orthodox Church, explaining that the Church's enhancing of political power affects its nature as an ecclesial community. Even before the beginning of the war against Ukraine, the works of Hovorun were focusing on deconstructing what he called political orthodoxies[69].

Another engagement with Erik Peterson's refutation of Schmittian understanding of political theology can be found in the works of the Greek theologian Pantelis Kalaitzidis. He notes: "Peterson suggests that the authentic political teaching of Christianity – based, as it is, on the Trinity – should actually undermine the unholy union of religion and politics, instead of providing it with theological support"[70]. While Hovorun frames his arguments in the line of the political theology debate, Kalaitzidis is using the Petersonian reading of eschatology, focusing on the aspect of fulfillment of prophecies. He reads the nostalgia for the Byzantine past as a form of realized eschatology; for him, theocracy and neo-nationalism are secularized forms of eschatology that drive the church to its submission to the authority of the state. Furthermore, Kalaitzidis interprets Peterson's criticism on the Byzantine Empire as political Arianism (Christ subordination to the Father implies a monarchic vision of the universe implying at the political level the support for one king). For him, the latter's strategy of legitimacy is rooted in Eusebius' model of the theopolitical construction of a "single sovereign state"[71]. What is more, he develops Peterson's idea of the analogy between monotheism and monar-

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[68] Id., *Civil Religion in the Orthodox Milieu, cit.*, p. 261.
[69] Id., *Political Orthodoxies: The Unorthodoxies of the Church coerced*, edited by A. J. Moyse - S. A. Kirkland, Fortress Press, Washington 2018.
[70] P. Kalaitzidis, *Orthodoxy and Political Theology*, World Council of Churches Publications, Geneva 2012, p. 31.
[71] *Ibi*, p. 27

chy further by giving textual examples stemming from Orthodox hymns.

For the moment these critical engagements from Orthodox theologians with the Orthodox Church remain scholarly perspectives which have not yet been put into practice. However, they served as a basis for a *Declaration on the Russian World*, signed by more than 1400 Orthodox theologians[72]. This declaration contains insights and points toward an important future direction. It rejects any deification of the state, or any support for Caesaropapism. Orienting Christians' eyes towards the eschatological fulfillment, the declaration condemns any narrative that replaces the Kingdom of God "with a kingdom of this world, be that Holy Rus', Sacred Byzantium, or any other earthly kingdom" as non-Orthodox[73]. The declaration rejects and condemns in a very clear language all forms of government that "deifies the state" as a form of usurpation of Christ's authority, and states that the Church's role is to build a theology of resistance against unjust political power.

5. *Conclusions*

Christian Orthodox engagements with the arguments of Erik Peterson are important echoes of his work. They prove that his scholarly and erudite arguments have reached to the core of a deep problem: power needs external legitimation, and because of this need, there is always the risk of formulating civil theologies. The role of theologians in front of this situation is to consolidate a theology of resistance against the Church's temptation to empower the various political narratives or regimes. Historical and political contexts differ from the time of Peterson's

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[72] *A Declaration on the "Russian World" (Russkii Mir) Teaching*, 13 March 2022 (consulted on line 20.09.2022,https://publicorthodoxy.org/2022/03/13/a-declaration-on-the-russian-world-russkii-mir-teaching/).
[73] *Ibidem.*

article; however, the theological criticisms still apply today. In the light of these parallels, two important points remain relevant: eschatological proviso towards any political system, and a refusal to read God's agency in any political event. Focusing on the prophetic nature of the Church, both Peterson and the cited Orthodox theologians agree that theology of history needs to be replaced with a critical theological reflection on political actuality. It is only through deconstructing ideological narratives embedded within the structures of churches that one can overcome the temptation of using Christianity as a civil religion. This temptation is beautifully summarized by Peterson: "As a mystery, power in the final analysis demands to be worshipped"[74]. This sentence explains the continuity between religion and political language, but also puts them in opposition to each other. Hence, Christians are obliged to reframe the relationship between state and Church, by overcoming of the Byzantine dream of *symphonia*.

Concludingly we can observe that what started as a polemic against Carl Schmitt, Erik Peterson's deconstruction of political theology serves until today to offer theological instruments in refuting abuses of Christian narratives to legitimize political power. The posterity of Peterson consists in recognizing that reducing Christianity to a civil religion is a constant temptation, a temptation subverted only by a strong eschatological reservation. As has been demonstrated in this paper, the key to the debate is the political quest for religious legitimation. In contrast to the ancient religious function, Peterson's position implies a refusal of using Christian images of God, providence, order, and history to build political constructions such as empires and nationalism.

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[74] E. Peterson, *Witness to the Truth*, in: id., *Theological tractates*, p. 166.