
CHAPTER 10

FROM POLITICAL THEOLOGY TO CRITICAL POLITICAL ETHICS

1. *The Legacy of Political Theology*

The term “political theology” stands for a struggle of legitimization of power and, at the same time, the justification of normative moral claims in modernity or postmodernity. The *discourse* on political theology can be regarded as the self-reflection of modern political/moral theory and theology itself regarding its normative sources. Christian theology has contributed to the discussion of political theology on all three levels: the political, the moral, and the understanding of theology that is presupposed in the different approaches to political theology. Today, the reformers within the Catholic Church and Catholic theology who depart from the neoscholastic metaphysics that dominated Catholic theology up to the 1960s emphasize God’s attributes of divine benevolence, *caritas*, compassion, and mercy.¹ As welcome as this turn to an ethics of love and mercy may be, it does not solve the underlying question that political theology raised, namely how to justify the normative claims that ethics makes in the name of the Christian faith. In this chapter, I will begin to answer this question in conversation with political theology through the lens of a critical political ethics, which is founded on an ethics of freedom that is open to transcendence and includes the political call for action as liberation towards justice.

1.1 POLITICAL THEOLOGY AND THE LEGITIMACY OF STATE POWER

Over the last decades, the question of political theology has reemerged as a lens to interpret and understand the current global order, structures of governance, the moral question of normativity and theology’s or religion’s role in the public sphere. A Christianity-friendly *philosophical* narrative emphasized that in the “secular age”, the valuing of transcendence is marginalized or lost (Taylor), to the effect of an alienation from oneself, others, the world, and God.² Christian theology responds to the assumed shallowness of meaning caused by modern rationality by emphasizing the public and political role of Christianity, which offers “ultimate” meanings of one’s life, rituals for life-experiences such as birth, marriage, or death, and a communal home. Liberal states, it is held, presuppose comprehensive concepts of the good, but they cannot promote these because of

1 The juxtaposition of the Jewish law and Christian love has often been used as an anti-Judaistic trope within Christianity. I will turn to an analysis of love and justice through the concept of compassion in chapter 13 in this volume.

2 Cf. H. ROSA, *Resonanz. Eine Soziologie der Weltbeziehung*, Berlin 2017.

their proclaimed neutrality regarding plural worldviews and values.³ Similar to some philosophical approaches to political theology, which claim that secularism cannot deal with the legitimization of political power without framing it in a theological paradigm, some theological approaches claim that moral philosophy cannot justify its normative claims without acknowledging the foundation of moral claims in divine law. Some political groups – often with Christian roots – have seized the renewed interest in the role of religion in the public sphere to promote an anti-modern political theology that goes back to the 19th and early 20th century: they interpret the modern liberal culture as a threat to Christianity (and humanity) that requires a new effort of re-Christianization or evangelization. They presuppose an understanding of God or the Divine that modern philosophy considers to be in conflict with the core value of modernity, namely freedom.⁴

For the United States of America especially, the intertwining of Christianity and national identity is striking. The early colonies put the biblical trope of “dominion” into practice, combining it with the biblical narrative of the (new) chosen people who carry out God’s will. This narrative is deeply engrained in its civil religion, as Robert Bellah coined it:

Behind the civil religion at every point lie Biblical archetypes: Exodus, Chosen People, Promised Land, New Jerusalem, Sacrificial Death and Rebirth. But it is also genuinely American and genuinely new. It has its own prophets and its own martyrs, its own sacred events and sacred places, its own solemn rituals and symbols. It is concerned that America be a society as perfectly in accord with the will of God as men can make it, and a light to all the nations.⁵

Bellah wrote these lines in 1967, but little has changed over the last decades, although the presidents do differ in their rhetoric. Examining the presidencies from R. Reagan to G. W. Bush, Wade C. Roof warns that Bellah may have unintentionally followed the script of conservative Christians who eagerly wished that this marriage between religious tropes and politics defined the nation’s identity. Still, Roof elaborates on Bellah’s thesis by discerning three narratives that are interwoven in American political identity, i. e. the myth of the Chosen Nation from the Hebrew Bible, the myth of America as Nature’s Nation that follows early modernity’s theory of natural rights, and the myth of the Millennial Nation that endows to America prosperity and its global role of liberation from oppressors:

The myth of a Chosen Nation arises out of the Hebrew Bible and suggests that Americans are exceptional in having a covenant with God: they are the New Israel in the language of the

3 Cf. for the liberal position cf. J. RAWLS, *Political Liberalism*, New York 1993. For a critique cf. M. SANDEL, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, Cambridge, MA 1998.

4 Cf. A. HONNETH, *Freedom’s Right. The Social Foundations of Democratic Life*, New York 2014.

5 R. N. BELLAH, *Civil Religion in America*, in: *Daedalus* (1967), 1–21, 18.

early Puritans. A second myth of origin – Nature's Nation, emerging out of the Enlightenment and Deism – gave rise to the notion that the United States arose out of the natural order, and that the country reflects the way God had intended things to be from the beginning of time. Building upon both of these foundational myths, the Millennial Nation myth implies that God chose America to bless the nations of the world with the unfolding of a golden age. The last two are obviously complimentary: one looking to the beginning of time, the other looking to the end of time.⁶

The intertwining of biblical-theological narratives with the political history of modern Western nations renders the rights to *liberty* and property, scientific and social *progress*, and (particular) nations' *savior* role in history as a thick foundation that has never entirely disappeared or, as in the case of the USA, is being explicitly evoked by all presidents, one way or the other. The political-theological intertwining must therefore be the starting point of any Christian (political) theology and (political) ethics today.

1.2 POLITICAL THEOLOGY AND WESTERN CHRISTIANITY

A few remarks may be helpful to structure the complex discourse of political theology in Christian thought:

First, throughout its history, political theology has distinguished between the political and the divine realm. However, Augustine, who most famously insisted on their distinction and made an effort to juxtapose the church and the state, *also* claimed that human history rests upon God's *providence*.⁷ Since its beginning, Christianity has wrestled with the question of human freedom and providence; in the context of political theology, the blurring of the lines between sovereign political leadership and divine providence was an issue that was often discussed either as question of human freedom or as a question of theodicy. If God directs human actions, political leaders are merely the representatives and executors of the divine will; ultimately, they are only instruments of God. Though this trope is deeply embedded in Judaism and Christianity alike, both religions also have regularly questioned their political-theological leaders – from Moses to the kings, prophets, and priests to Jesus of Nazareth. In Christian history, the slaughtering, enslavement, and degradation of other peoples, other ethnicities, or other reli-

6 W. C. ROOF, *American Presidential Rhetoric from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush: Another Look at Civil Religion*, in: *Social Compass* 56/2 (2009), 286–301, 288.

7 For a thorough discussion of Augustine's concept of history and providence cf. B. DEEN SCHILDGEN, *Divine Providence: A History: Bible, Virgil, Orosius, Augustine, and Dante*, New York, NY 2012, especially Ch. 3. S. Oliver's interpretation, juxtaposing the positions of deism and "intelligent design" offers a middle position that connects the (extrinsic) providence with the (intrinsic) teleology of creation. Cf. S. OLIVER, *Augustine on Creation, Providence and Motion*, in: *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 18/4 (2016), 379–398.

gions were often legitimized by invoking the will of God – but at the same time, they have also been questioned by Christianity. In early modern Christian theology, the question of legitimate political power and the task of evangelization were tied to the colonialization of the Americas, paving the way to centuries of Western imperialism, slavery, and Christian missions. Theologically, the trope of the earth as “dominium” of humans was seen as legitimization of the *conquistadores*, and it orients the underlying instrumental reason from Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis* to the industrialization of societies in the 19th and 20th century, from the fight against communism to the depletion and collapse of an unsustainable economic order in the early 21st century.

While modern Western history can certainly be seen in view of the promotion of freedom rights and democratization of political power, it is *also* a history of colonialism, which no critical political ethics can ignore. It demands of theologians and moral philosophers, as well as social or political theorists to critically examine the history and the terms we often uncritically use to describe Christian values or the “Christian culture”. Over against the reemerging imageries, currently popular among Christians in Europe and the USA, especially imageries of the glorious “Christian heritage”, critical theology warns to remember the often-ignored violence of Christian history, and urges theology *and* religious groups to be aware of the complicity of Christians with unjust policies in the present. Historical knowledge will help to question the juxtaposition of a religious “culture of life” over against a secular “culture of death”, as Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict often labeled the modern liberal societies, because such a separation of the religious and secular sphere is untenable, and the juxtaposition of a theological and a secular ethics is undesirable.

Second, Christian political theology engages in reflection on the institutional dimension of faith, namely in the organizational form of *ecclesia*. Already the early faith communities required an institutional structure – the historical studies of Early Christianity offer insights into the plurality of approaches and the effort to allow for differences and sustain the unity of the believers, inside and outside of Judaism. In the Western “Holy Roman Empire” that lasted for more than a millennium and mostly shaped the understanding of Christianity in the West, Christian theology accommodated to its political role within the empire, shaping both the *empire’s* understanding of worldly authority and the *church’s* role in the world.⁸ Christian theology always agreed that any theology is, somehow, political theology, but the different groups within Christianity make different claims on how

8 Cf. P. BROWN, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000*, Cambridge, MA 1996; P. BROWN, *Authority and the Sacred: Aspects of the Christianisation of the Roman World*, Cambridge/New York 1995.

theology should interact with political power – differing in the political spheres of power, and differing depending on what point in history one examines. The task for critical political ethics therefore entails two different steps: the one concerns attending to the history of marginalized people in order to narrate and understand the structures and effects of the conflation of Christian tropes and political power. Non-Western Christians and theologians especially challenge white, bourgeois Western Christianity.⁹ The other step, emphasized by feminist, womanist, and black theologians who underscore the kyriarchial structures and the structural racism of white Christian theology,¹⁰ entails the acknowledgment of how thoroughly Christian theology and Catholic institutions have contributed and continue to contribute to the denial of freedom, equal rights, and thus, to the violation of human dignity.

Third, at the beginning of the 21st century, social ethicists who are shaped by the theology of Vatican II engage in the analyses of social, economic, and political structures; at the same time, they often engage in social and political projects. Even though lay theologians – and women especially – still lack the internal ecclesial power of direct participation in the internal governance of the church, they regularly contribute to social, economic, and public affairs. Apart from this academic work, the official representatives of the Catholic Church, i. e. the Vatican or the local Bishops Conferences of the Catholic Church, play an important role in public reasoning, political deliberations, and political-theological lobbying for particular policies. Just like their “reformist” and “progressive” counterparts, numerous conservative or traditionalist Christian groups engage publicly to promote their interests. In the USA, they become visible, for example, in political campaigns against abortion or same sex marriage, or as sponsors of lawsuits regarding (Christian) religious freedom, which these groups see threatened by the secular state and culture in the US and Europe.¹¹

Fourth, when it comes to political theology, it matters whether one speaks from the Western political perspective or from another perspective. Even within Christianity, not to speak of Judaism or Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, or any of the world religions, it matters whether one speaks from a Roman-Catholic or a Protestant, an Orthodox Christian or any other denominational perspective. Any po-

9 H. HAKER/L. C. SUSIN/E. MESSI METOGO, *Postcolonial Theology*, London 2013; K. PUI-LAN, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, Louisville, KY 2005; CH. A. KIRK-DUGGAN, *Misbegotten Anguish: A Theology and Ethics of Violence*, St. Louis, MO. 2001.

10 E. SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA, *Transforming Vision: Exploration in Feminist Theology*, Minneapolis, MN 2014; E. M. TOWNES, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, New York 2006; B. MAS-SINGALE, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, Maryknoll, NY 2010.

11 Cf. chapter 2 in this volume.

litical theology, that is, must reflect on its own history that is inscribed into the concepts of political theology: political theology in the singular disguises one's particular context and perspective and is therefore prone to absolutizing a specific reading. In the following, I will therefore focus on my own location, which is the Western, and more precisely, the German discourse on political theology. While my approach of a critical political ethics is rooted in the Catholic tradition, my goal is to develop it as an overall approach of ethics that does not separate philosophy and theology, even though they can be distinguished in their own starting points and traditions.

1.3 THE LEGACY OF CARL SCHMITT

Carl Schmitt's particular political theology is misleading if read as "theology". Instead, his questions are, from a legal perspective, centered on state authority, legitimacy of the law, and legitimacy of political power. Schmitt wrote from the particular context of German legal philosophy in the early and mid-20th century. Walter Benjamin's image of the chess machine that hides a dwarf under the chess table who secretly steers the moves of the visible chess player captures Schmitt's view, too, namely that parliamentary democracy resembles a puppet that is nevertheless grounded in the arbitrariness of a quasi-divine lawgiver, without being able to name or show it.¹² Schmitt's historical context informs his concept more than is sometimes acknowledged.¹³ In contrast to France, Germany's Prussian monarchy only ended in 1918, with the end of the First World War. After the failed revolution in 1918/19, the Weimar Republic was established in 1919, transforming Germany into a parliamentary democracy. The transition from monarchy to democracy through a revolution was anything but smooth. During this period, Schmitt joined the opponents of a democratic governance structure. Since much has been written about the implications for the theory of law, here I am only interested how Schmitt's understanding resonated with and was received in Catholic Theology. In its own self-understanding, the Roman Catholic Church is organized as a *community* of all Christian believers, although its explicitly antimodern ecclesial model in the 19th and the first half of the 20th century followed the paradigm of the "societas perfecta", promoted by the ultramontane theologians at the

12 W. BENJAMIN, *On the Concept of History*, in: H. EILAND/M. W. JENNINGS (ed.), *Selected Writings IV, 1938-1940*, Cambridge, MA 2003, 389-400. S. ŽIŽEK, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*, Cambridge, MA 2003.

13 Cf. G. AGAMBEN, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford 1998. For a good analysis of the context cf. F. SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA, *Political Theology and the Critique of Modernity. Facing the Challenges of the Present*, in: *Distinktion* 10 (2005), 87-105.

First Vatican Council and highly influenced by German theologians.¹⁴ On the one hand, many Catholic leaders were sympathetic to the underlying thought of Carl Schmitt's Political Theology because his views mirrored their own political-theological positions that rested on the explicitly anti-modern, authoritarian political theology that had been cemented at the First Vatican Council in 1871-1875.¹⁵ On the other hand, with the early texts of what was later called Catholic Social Teaching, a new social ethics had already emerged that complemented the personal moral theology with a social or structural and political-institutional approach. While raising his voice in solidarity with the masses of impoverished workers due to the social transformation of industrialized work, Pope Leo XIII still presupposed a "top down" approach of the Church in his influential encyclical letter *Rerum Novarum*. Responding as much to the poverty-infusing capitalism as to the specter of communism that was programmatically atheist, the pope applied the premodern ecclesial understanding of a hierarchical, patriarchal, and autocratic church to the family structure, as well as to the structure of a modern company or factory, urging the owners to take responsibility for their employees, and encouraging the latter to organize in unions. Like Leo XIII, his successors were hostile to the egalitarian shift entailed in the idea of political liberalism, and hostile to democracy. The underlying Catholic imagery of society that functions like the domestic *oikos*, the patriarchal economy of the family, rests especially on different roles of the sexes. In the public, the Church never doubted its authority in political-ethical matters, which contrasted starkly with the liberal, secular democracies that emerged together with the economic structure of global capitalism.

The Catholic ideal of the hierarchical society (and church) was upheld until the Vatican II Council in the 1960s. Only then, the reformers began to replace the antimodernist political theology with an alternative understanding of the role of the Church, opening it to other religions and to the (modern) world. From the reformers' view, the Church needed also to change its internal institutional structures, especially regarding the role of the laity who were to be seen as subjects and not merely addressees of the Church. Unsurprisingly, many of the reforms were hard-won and not embraced by all bishops and/or local churches in the same way.¹⁶ The one area that was left unsettled at the Council, however, concerned the

14 For a comparison between the First and Second Vatican Council cf. P. GRANFIELD, *The Church as Societas Perfecta in the Schemata of Vatican I*, in: *Church History* 48/4 (1979), 431-446. Granfield summarizes the relation in this way: "Emphasis has shifted dramatically from the sociological to the biblical; from the jurisdictional to the sacramental; from the sectarian to the ecumenical; from the papal to the episcopal; from the hierarchical to the collegial" (446).

15 Cf. B. J. FOX, *Carl Schmitt And Political Catholicism: Friend or Foe?*, New York, NY 2015.

16 Many of the documents of the Vatican II Council demonstrate the ambiguity of the two approaches, often resulting in tensions that have been the object of multiple studies since the 1960s.

normative foundation of the law (canon law and secular law alike) in the tradition of the natural law, and the foundation of morality: how this tradition was interpreted decided upon its opposition to or alliance with the new global political order. The Church officially embraced the human rights of the United Nations at the Vatican II Council and in some encyclicals after that, and it interpreted the secular concept of human dignity as a translation of the theological concept.¹⁷ Benjamin's image had returned from both sides: secular philosophers and legal scholars considered the very foundation of the international legal structure as ultimately dependent on a concept of human nature, while theologians added to this the claim that ultimately, human concepts are derived from divine law and revelation. This latter interpretation, however, concealed a possible neoscholastic interpretation that interprets the concept of "nature" in static terms – a fact that Pope Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI invoked especially in questions of human sexuality and gender.

The Catholic Church has not been the only critic of liberal democracies. Due to its biopower, as Michel Foucault coined it, Western societies transformed the power structure from brute domination to the subjective internalization of binary concepts of the "normal" and the "abnormal", or moral and immoral practices.¹⁸ Normative orders are increasingly seen as historically contingent and interwoven with political interests, creating a new legitimization crisis of liberal democracies. In this climate, Schmitt's critique of democracy has reemerged especially in postmodern circles, often in disregard of the fact that Schmitt embraced the National Socialists and was obviously used by them for his sympathetic views on the powers of the "sovereign". Schmitt reinterpreted his political theology – and his views on the Nazis – after World War II, but he never revoked his critique of modern liberal democracies.¹⁹ The term "political theology" therefore becomes

Pope John Paul II especially embodies this ambiguity, resulting in important Encyclicals on social issues (labor and migration among them) while cementing the ecclesial structure of the hierarchical and patriarchal church.

17 In line with this, the conflict of interpretations centered on "knowledge" and "faith" when the philosopher Jürgen Habermas and then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger discussed the relationship of philosophy and theology. Cf. J. HABERMAS, *Dialektik der Säkularisierung: Über Vernunft und Religion*, Freiburg i. Br. 2005; J. HABERMAS, *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays*, Cambridge, UK/Malden, MA 2008.

18 M. FOUCAULT, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, New York 1975; M. FOUCAULT, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, New York 1988; M. FOUCAULT, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, *An Introduction*, New York 1978; M. FOUCAULT, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 2, *The Use of Pleasure*, New York 1985; M. FOUCAULT, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 3, *The Care of The Self*, New York 1988.

19 For a concise summary and contextualization of Schmitt's position in contemporary Catholic thought cf. F. SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA, *Political Theology and the Critique of Modernity*.

ambiguous, meaning different things for different people, and for the discipline of political theory and theology. It has become a term that is used to either *analyze* the legitimization crisis of democracy in Schmitt's vein, to *describe* the anti-liberal groups who turn to religion as the foundation of their value systems, or to *embrace* the theological foundation of modernity. The above-mentioned analyses of the US presidencies demonstrate that the reference to the divine is especially important for the American national identity, as Robert Bellah emphasizes:

What difference does it make that sovereignty belongs to God? Though the will of the people as expressed in majority vote is carefully institutionalized as the operative source of political authority, it is deprived of an *ultimate significance*. *The will of the people is not itself the criterion of right and wrong*. There is a higher criterion in terms of which this will can be judged; it is possible that the people may be wrong. The president's obligation extends to the higher criterion.²⁰

More than anything else, the particular Western discourse on political theology signals the unresolved relation between religion and modernity in the "West", and it points to two conflicting visions especially for the role of the Christian religion in the public sphere of Western democracies – the one is serving as a moral foundation of the political and moral normative order, and the other is a post-Christian critical theology that examines the theological roots of any political power. Neither of these capture my own approach, however: while I share the necessity to critique political power when and insofar it seeks legitimization in reference to a divine authority, I do not wish to claim that any political power rests upon a metaphysical foundation. Christian theology and ethics can indeed be postmetaphysical – but they must still explain the particular role of theology in relation to the political.²¹

20 R. N. BELLAH, *Civil Religion in America*, 4. (My emphasis)

21 I am using the term postmetaphysical in Habermas' meaning. Habermas departs from an ontological metaphysics of human nature and towards the intersubjective foundation of moral claims in history. I do not, however, understand intersubjectivity to be based upon a social contract; rather, it must be based on mutual recognition and respect. Cf. J. HABERMAS, *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*, Boston MA 1992; J. HABERMAS, *Postmetaphysical Thinking II*, Hoboken NJ 2017. The relevance for theology is taken up in J. HABERMAS, *Between Naturalism and Religion*.

2. *Political Theology as Critique and Liberation from Injustice*

In spite of the changes of its self-identity as a sacramental and communal Church at the Second Vatican Council, the internal *governance* structure of the Catholic Church still reflects the continuity of the premodern, nondemocratic epistemology. The Pontiff's *sovereign power* was affirmed under Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI,²² although under the papacy of Pope Francis, the Church has returned to the reform process of the Vatican II Council. In Francis' vision, the Church is more episcopal than papal, more pastoral than dogmatic, and more informed by the practical approach of a *communio* theology than the adherence to dogmatic truths as emphasized by the former popes. Interestingly, both sides agree that the underlying anthropology, captured in a naturalistic understanding of Natural Law, must not be changed – even remain untouched by Pope Francis. Despite the imagery of the feminized, other-serving role of the Church in the social sphere, it is interesting that this conceals the *de facto* political role the Church has in international politics. For example, the Vatican's status at the United Nations is neither conceived as a non-governmental organization nor a state proper; instead, it has a special status as a “permanent observer”. Even though it has no voting right, it can use its authority indirectly to influence all political initiatives that it considers important.

2.1 THE NEW POLITICAL THEOLOGY

The *New Political Theology* that emerged in Germany in the 1970s and which is associated with the names of Johann Baptist Metz, Jürgen Moltmann, and Dorothee Sölle, started first and foremost as a *theology* that had to grapple with the history of German fascism and the Shoah – and Christianity's complicity with both through its own antijudaism and antisemitism.²³ Retrospectively, it may be tied to liberation theology because it called for the “interruption” of an unjust global order, but it emerged in the very particular, German context several decades after World War II. It coincided with other political theologies that were developed in other contexts, mainly South American liberation theology, the renewal of black

22 The “Fundamental Law of the Vatican City State”, introduced by Pope John Paul II in 2000 and replacing the former Law from 1929 in its entirety, reinforces the Pope's sovereign power. Art. 1.1. states this unequivocally: “The Supreme Pontiff, Sovereign of Vatican City State, has the fullness of legislative, executive and judicial powers.” JOHN PAUL II, *Fundamental Law of Vatican City State*, Vatican 2000, https://www.legislationline.org/.../Vatican_Fundamental_law_2000_en.pdf.

23 Cf. J. MOLTSMANN, *Political Theology*, in: *Theology Today* 28/1 (1971), 6–23; D. SOELLE, *Political Theology*, Minneapolis, MN 1974; J. B. METZ, *Zum Begriff der neuen Politischen Theologie 1967–1997*, Mainz 1997; J. B. METZ, *Faith in History and Society* (Glaube in Geschichte und Gesellschaft, 1977), New York 2007; J. B. METZ, *Im dialektischen Prozess der Aufklärung*, 2. Teilband, *Neue Politische Theologie – Versuch eines Korrektivs der Theologie*, Freiburg i. Br. 2016.

theology, feminist theology, and womanist theology, and all these movements reflect the yearning for a different Christian theology than the one that was seen in the different denominations. They all agreed that to be Christian means to engage in the struggle against injustice, oppression, or domination, and for liberation.²⁴ Hence, their understanding of “the political” radically departed from the “top down” approach that reflected the relation of state power and religious power.

It is not necessary here to rehearse the history of the German *New Political Theology*; rather, I want to point to some of its elements that I find still relevant today. *First*, as a *theological* concept, it spoke “ad intra” rather than “ad extra”, aiming at reflecting theology’s role in its own time. *Second*, as a *political* concept, it unmasked the “private faith” that is either excluded from the public-political deliberations by defenders of secular agnosticism, or itself indifferent to the structural suffering and harm, and oppression of peoples or groups that Christians are complicit to or directly contribute to. *Third*, as a *public political theology*, the *New Political Theology* unmasked the partiality of liberalism behind its mask of neutrality, pointing to its involvement and/or complicity with structural injustice. In contrast, political theologians advocated Christianity’s non-neutral perspective rather than shying away from it, with the priority status of any suffering individual or group. *Fourth*, the new political theology departed both from the Schmittian political-theological decisionism that rests on the sovereignty of the political leader, and a hermeneutic theology that pretended to be a-political in its interest to discern divine truth. In contrast to both, the new political theology offered a radical reinterpretation of the “authority of God”. Rather than tying it to the Church’s leadership, the new political theology insists that theological authority is embodied in the suffering individual or in suffering groups or peoples. Thus *fifth*, it requires a turn from *orthodoxy* to the *orthopraxis* of liberation and the struggle for justice. *Sixth*, it offered theology a method, namely critical theory, that it took up from the German Frankfurt School, especially the “Critical Theory” of Max Horkheimer, further developed by Theodor W. Adorno. Anticipating the later works of Michel Foucault, Horkheimer had claimed as early as 1937 that critical theory, in contrast to traditional (empirical and positivist) theory, reflects any knowledge’s *situatedness* within societal contexts and its function within the capitalist context of modernity.²⁵ In contrast to the sovereignty concept, however, critical theory provides an epistemology that calls for an ongoing *self-critique* and *social critique* of the normative orders. Critical theory takes sides, because it has an emancipatory (or liberationist) *interest* in changing the practices that reify and

24 Cf. for a good overview of the multiple approaches, for example, C. HOVEY/E. PHILLIPS (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Political Theology*, Cambridge, MA 2015.

25 M. HORKHEIMER, *Critical Theory. Selected Essays*, New York 1972.

commodify human nature as much as non-human nature, and human practices in general. The question is, however, how its own normative standpoint can be justified.

2.2 POLITICAL THEOLOGY AND CRITICAL THEORY

In the 1940s, Horkheimer and Adorno intensified their critique of modern rationality in their essays on the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.²⁶ They argued that what had been envisioned by liberal modern theory as the victory of rationality over irrationality, and the victory of the “autonomous, sovereign subject” over against the enchained, submissive religious subject, had turned out to be a bureaucracy that culminated in Hitler’s genocide. Enlightenment did not generate progress but, quite to the contrary, it enabled the rationalization of violence, symbolized in the industrialized mass killings in the Nazi death camps, and personified in the architect of the Shoah, Adolf Eichmann, as Hannah Arendt depicted him in her book on the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in 1961.²⁷ In the 1960s, Adorno responded to the catastrophe of modern thought with a reversal of the Hegelian dialectics. His “negative dialectics” entails the critique of injustice, violence, oppression, and human evil and the reification that underlies modern capitalism – but it is also a critique of any concept of history that is grounded in progress.²⁸

Opponents to critical theory over the last decades – most importantly in the group that was summarized as communitarianism – agreed with its critique of the “atomism” and individualism of modern morality, though they drew strikingly different conclusions. Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre especially argued for the return to a communitarian philosophy inspired by the political theory of Aristotle, together with an ethics of virtues, to be formed within communities of shared values. Michael Walzer responded with a theory of justice that is an alternative to Rawls’ political liberalism, and a critical hermeneutics that takes up the

26 TH. W. ADORNO/M. HORKHEIMER, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, London 2016 (orig. 1944).

27 H. ARENDT, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, New York 1976.

28 TH. W. ADORNO, *Negative Dialectics*, New York 1983. The latter is a response to the Hegelian and Marxian progressivist philosophy of history. Likewise, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* provides a critique of modern reason, especially instrumental reason (TH. W. ADORNO/M. HORKHEIMER, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*). The philosophy of progress was, however, already questioned at the turn to the 20th century, when Nietzsche declared the “death of God” and announced a new philosophy of history that dared to break with teleology as eschatology. For Nietzsche, this meant to replace the ‘end’ of history with the perfection of history in the “highest exemplars” (Nietzsche). Cf. for the current discussion A. ALLEN, *The End of Progress*, New York 2016. She opens a debate that – finally – confronts critical theory with the different perspective on modernity, offered by postcolonial theories. Cf. a further analysis in chapter 11 in this volume.

Jewish tradition of social critique.²⁹ Metz, who was certainly inspired by the turn to a “communio-Church” over against the pre-Vatican II “societas perfecta Church”, remained skeptical of such a communitarian ethics: he agreed with critical theory’s central focus on the “suffering subject” as the criterion of any political theory. Likewise, he argued, political theology requires a negative universalism of what must be overcome rather than a utopian vision of what ought to come in the future. It embraces the moral imperative to negate moral harm, structural oppression, and ultimately, any form of injustice, instead of depicting an ideal society or community of believers. Metz’s political theology embraced the *eschatological proviso* that had accompanied political theology since Augustine.³⁰ He also famously claimed that anthropology without the turn to history loses its critical edge – as theology, however, it must see history in “the eschatological horizon of hope.”³¹ Taking up the dialectical thinking of Horkheimer and Adorno, in Metz’s theology, Christianity’s Jewishness is the forgotten and repressed side that throughout Christianity’s entanglement with Western politics has been marginalized or denied in favor of Hellenistic idealism.

The Shoah radically changes the relationship of Judaism and Christianity: Auschwitz is the abyss that separates the two religions, and yet, Christianity must *acknowledge* its own antijudaism that was conducive to the complicity with the Nazis’ racialized antisemitism. Christianity must take at least partial *responsibility* for the Shoah because of the intertwining of antijudaism and antisemitism. This acknowledgment and responsibility must be the premise of any Christian theology from this point onwards. Theological reasoning cannot, Metz holds, evade theodicy as long as human suffering and evil exists, but theodicy – as the justification of evil in the name of God – is exactly what has become impossible after Auschwitz. Theology, therefore, is first and foremost a question to God, and a

29 Cf. CH. TAYLOR, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Durham, NC 2008; M. WALZER, *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad*, Notre Dame, IN 1994. A. MACINTYRE, *Dependent Rational Animals. Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*, Chicago 1999; CH. TAYLOR, *Sources of the Self. The Making of Modern Identity*, Cambridge, MA 1989.

30 The works by Metz, Moltmann, and Sölle are well known and will not be listed here; cf., however, for a discussion among the scholars who shaped political theology: M. WELKER/F. SCHÜSSLER/K. TANNER (ed.), *Political Theology. Contemporary Challenges and Future Directions*, Louisville, KY 2013. For my own works on Metz cf. H. HAKER, “Compassion als Weltprogramm des Christentums” – Eine ethische Auseinandersetzung mit Johann Baptist Metz, in: *Concilium* 37/4 (2001), 436–450; H. HAKER, *Walter Benjamin and Christian Critical Ethics – A Comment*, in: C. DICKINSON/S. SYMONS (ed.), *Walter Benjamin and Theology*, New York 2016, 286–316. Both essays entail a more thorough analysis of Metz’s works.

31 J. B. METZ, *Theology of the World*, cit. in: M. WELKER/F. SCHÜSSLER/K. TANNER (ed.), *Political Theology*, 1.

questioning of the image of God as sovereign, omniscient, and omnipotent ruler of history. Put differently: when theology speaks of God (*theo-logein*), it must not render invisible or inaudible the question addressed to God that initiated theology's reflection in the first place, and this is the question how the hope in God can be justified in a world of evil.

As much as the *New Political Theology* was (and is) therefore a theology and *ethics* of the suffering human person and the oppressed people – and not a theology of the 'polis' as state, or a theology of political sovereignty – its own historical roots must not be ignored: it is a theology after Auschwitz. Schmitt's political theology discerned the gap of legitimacy that in his view conceals the secularized 'theology' of the emperors. In contrast, the *New Political Theology* is not interested in legal theory; as theology, it is a *memoria passionis*, the memory of suffering, of the forgotten people, the suffering "wretched of the earth"³² as the historical signs of the cross throughout history.³³ For 20th century Christian theology, political theology called to take sides when the Catholic Church (to speak only of my own denomination) clearly had to make choices with political implications. For political theology, these choices were not abstract alternatives of theological or political systems; they were the alternatives between standing with Hitler or the Confessional Church and Catholic resisters, with Franco or democracy, with Pinochet or the dissidents, with the white apartheid regime in South Africa or the prisoner Nelson Mandela. And within the Catholic Church, it was – and is – the alternative between standing with the Vatican Pontiff and the clergy or with all the silenced and overlooked individuals and groups who continue to be victimized by the Church. The *New Political Theology* declared that the latter are the *subjects of theology*, no longer merely the obedient recipients of commands issued by the Supreme Pontiff or his Magisterium. This reform theology coincided with a broad global movement of postcolonial philosophy and theology, which demanded of the old colonial powers to acknowledge that the "subaltern" speak;³⁴ it was aligned with and received by liberation theology, intercultural theology and different contextual theologies – and last but not least, it coincided historically with the many faces of feminist, womanist, or mujerista theologies – all these new approaches are part of a new, multi-faceted, contextual and critical political theology that informs a critical political ethics.

32 F. FANON, *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York 2007 (orig. 1961).

33 J. B. METZ (in Zusammenarbeit mit Johan Reikerstorfer), *Memoria Passionis. Ein provozierendes Gedächtnis in pluralistischer Gesellschaft*, Freiburg i. Br. 42011. Cf. also J. MOLTSMANN, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, Minneapolis, MN 1993. Cf. similarly J. H. CONE, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Maryknoll, NY 2011.

34 G. CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, in: L. GROSSBERG/C. NELSON (ed.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Urbana, IL 1988, 271–313.

Western democracies are currently witnessing a wave of nationalist movements that embrace an authoritarian political governance structure, while leftwing movements also critique liberal democracies, however advocating for more rather than less democracy.³⁵ Both movements in Europe and the USA coincide in their critique of the “establishment”, i. e. the current governance structure of Western (liberal) democracies – both movements therefore share the conviction that the liberal or neoliberal political-economic order must be interrupted. Even though the Right and the Left differ in their assessment of the concept of *sovereignty and authority*, they both agree in their *critique of modernity* and their *critique of liberal democracy* as a political theory and praxis. Right-leaning populists often invoke the Christian political-theological narrative of a state that should be politically and morally guided by God. Insofar as the political theology is promoted by Christian groups or denominations, the “revolutionary”, “interruptive” understanding of political theology overlaps with the question of how civic/public (moral) discourses are translated into political deliberations and institutional decisions. The philosophical discourse on political theology therefore raises the question whether Christian theology itself can escape the authoritarian model that rests upon a metaphysics of divine authority and divine law, or in other words, whether it is possible to envision the *theological* dimension in the concept of political theology differently.

3. Political Theology and Christian Ethics

3.1 MORAL JUSTIFICATION RECONSIDERED

The discourse on political legitimization is part of a shift in modernity that began in the 17th century but took another turn in the late 18th century. This is often associated with the turn to the social contract in political theory, which is based on the free decision of citizens to choose the sovereign as ruler. Beginning with Hume, moral philosophy, however, has long critiqued an ethics that is based upon contract theory;³⁶ Kant’s concept of autonomy *binds* the individual by a self-given law not by a social contract, even though the latter is important for the political legitimization of laws. Modernity’s reference to “inalienable” rights, human dignity, or equality and justice conceals the transformation of the medieval metaphysical natural law theory into the modern political theory of natural rights. The social contract theory from Hobbes to Rousseau to 20th century liber-

35 Cf., for example, E. LACLAU/CH. MOUFFE, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London 2014.

36 For a convincing argument against a contractarian moral philosophy that underlies, among others, discourse ethics, cf. H. NAGL-DOCEKAL, *Innere Freiheit: Grenzen der nachmetaphysischen Moralkonzeptionen*, Berlin 2014.

al *political* theories does indeed center on the individual's liberty—but it cannot, as Kant argued convincingly, be taken as moral theory, because it does not transcend the position of self-interested individuals who trade a part of their natural liberty for the sake of security and peace.³⁷ Liberalism entails a paradox: it cannot secure “moral truths” in a metaphysical order like a correspondence theory of truth, while it can also not fully embrace nominalism or a conventional theory of truth either. Instead, Hobbes focuses on the validity of the law, which is its legitimacy, and this is guaranteed by the legitimacy of the *lawmaker*, i. e. the sovereign. This is why the legacy of Hobbes is so important in the political debate, collapsing Kant's understanding of autonomy into the self-determination of the free (male) individual who agrees to the social contract. In contrast to the interpretation of liberty that dominates the Anglo-American liberalism, Kant assumes that while it is impossible to justify normative claims substantively, a person's arbitrary freedom (as he calls it) that is defined by self-interest does not meet the standards of moral freedom or, in Kant's term, the *good will*. Thus, for Kant, justification of moral claims does exactly *not* mean that the principles of action are ‘subjective’, i. e. *merely* based on personal convictions or social conventions, even though they are agent-dependent and subject-centered. Nor are moral claims identical with the political liberty that can be the subject of the social contract. With the concept of moral autonomy, Kant established a transcendental or self-reflective moral principle (the categorical imperative) that every agent must accept qua being an agent, and as an agent among other agents.

Habermas' postmetaphysical discourse ethics, I believe, confuses Kant's justification of moral norms with the foundation of political liberalism in social contract theory. Christine Korsgaard who is also indebted to Kant but prioritizes his moral philosophy over his political philosophy for the foundation of moral claims, explains the “sources of normativity” by way of the immanent requirements of reason.³⁸ Whatever path one may follow, ethical theory, this means, must clarify the distinction between legitimation and justification, and the relation of ethics and law. Unfortunately, Catholic theology rarely keeps the two spheres apart when speaking of its own ecclesial-political setting, rendering Catholic moral theology a political theology of (moral) sovereignty or, in other words, conflating the legitimacy of the Magisterium's *political* authority with the

37 For a critique of this tradition cf. CH. W. MILLS, *The Racial Contract*, Ithaca, NY 1997.

38 Cf. for different versions of a Kantian ethics in contemporary ethics A. GEWIRTH, *Reason and Morality*, Chicago/London 1978; ONORA O'NEILL, *Acting on Principle: An Essay on Kantian Ethics*, Cambridge, MA 2013; CH. M. KORSGAARD, *The Sources of Normativity*, Cambridge, MA 1996. Habermas' and Apel's discourse ethics is also indebted to Kant, yet both turn – albeit in different ways – to the linguistic and social mediation of normative claims.

authority to define what is *morally* right or wrong. It never occurs to proponents of this theology that when they claim to speak in the name of a *moral* law, what they mean is that they hold the political legitimization power of certain practices. Applying Hobbes' lawgiving power of the sovereign to Catholic morality, yet in the name of divine authority, becomes an *entirely* political act and, because of the institutional structure of the Church that does not entail any democratic procedure of legitimization, renders papal authority immune to any critique. My approach to Christian ethics is *critical* because it follows Kant's concept of moral autonomy as the freedom – and responsibility – of every moral agent to use their capability for moral reasoning. It follows the scholastic tradition that emphasized reason as distinguishing humans from other animals, and it follows the theological tradition that insists on the binding force of one's conscience in matters of morality.

3.2 THEOLOGICAL ETHICS AFTER VATICAN II

In an essay on the “Authority of God” from 2005, which he revised in 2013, Avishai Margalit discerns the images at play in political theology, and he offers a genealogy that is not only interesting for the discourse on political theology as depicted above but also for the analysis of Catholic moral theology. The debate on the justification of coercion and violence – either as state violence against certain groups within the citizenry or as the violence of revolutionary groups – had accompanied modern political theory since the French Revolution, but it became virulent again in view of the Russian Revolution in 1917 and after the German November Revolution of 1919 with the subsequent Weimar Republic. According to Margalit, Bakunin stood for the anarchist view, Schmitt for the authoritarian one. In both versions, Margalit argues, God appears as “father”, “king”, or “sovereign”, and even though the judgment of this sovereign power differs strikingly in the two political approaches, both reveal a “fascist picture of God”: beyond the need of any justification, political deliberation or expertise, “God” is conceived as the supreme leader and the “supreme decision maker”. His (sic!) authority is based on omniscience, omnipotence, and supreme benevolence; hence he commands, and he demands obedience. The sovereign's will is indeed “beyond good and evil”, beyond the “laws of nature”, and unconstrained by any reasoning. Margalit states:

In my account, authority and sovereignty have contents which are independent of a religious theological frame, yet these notions are in the grip of a theological picture of the world. To be in the grip of a picture is to confuse a model of reality with reality without being aware of it.³⁹

39 A. MARGALIT, *Revisiting God's Authority*, in: *Social Research* 80/1 (2013), 77–100, 84.

The relationship to the ultimate authority is one of “fear and love”. Margalit demonstrates how the imagery of political power and the divine reinforce each other until they blend into the one imagery of the sovereign *Führer*:

The secular counterpart to the principle of the authority of the big decider is terribly grim. It is the *Führerprinzip* that establishes the absolute authority of the leader, due to his charismatic power as a resolute decider. (90)

While the Popes and the Magisterium insist up to today on their authority that collapses moral justifications of normative claims into ecclesial legitimacy, a new generation of Catholic theologians after the Vatican II Council reinterpreted the natural law tradition.⁴⁰ This generation of scholars, including some of the leading moral theologians in Europe and the USA, began to reconceptualize Christian moral theology, more implicitly than explicitly modifying the traditional notion of Christian freedom as obedience to the moral law as prescribed by the Pontiff. Many theological ethicists could follow Karl Rahner who paved the way for a theological anthropology that rests upon freedom as openness to transcendence. Most moral theologians departed from the neoscholastic theology of the 19th century and instead returned to the ethics of Thomas Aquinas, whose affirmation of moral agency that is guided by reason, conscience, and faith they embraced. Pope John XXIII, too, spelled out the Vatican II notion of the Church faced *towards* the world and the Church *in* the world. Some of the most influential Papal Social Encyclicals of the 20th century were written in this post-Vatican II era, such as *Mater et Magistra*, *Pacem et Terris*, or *Progressio Populorum*. They clearly paved the way for a renewal of Catholic moral theology and social ethics, which could be seen as merging to one Christian ethics with two emphases, one reflecting on the moral foundations, the rights, responsibilities, and virtues of the moral agent, and the other reflecting upon the social mediations and institutional structures of social and political ethics. The concordance of Papal teachings with theological and ethical scholarship did not last, however.

Pope Paul VI's Encyclical *Humane Vitae* of 1968 was considered by many theologians, not to speak of the Catholic laity in general, a slap in the face and a watershed moment. Many theologians – and bishops – stated their dissent to this sexual morality publicly, while Catholic couples almost entirely departed from it. As we now know, physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, and physical, emotional, and sexual assaults of women, men, and children by priests, monks, and nuns had not only been ongoing all along but hidden from the public (and from prosecu-

⁴⁰ For the influence of Jacques Maritain on the Human Rights Declaration cf. J. MARITAIN, *Christianity and Democracy, the Rights of Man and Natural Law*, San Francisco, CA 2012. For the influence of John Courtney Murray on the Vatican II Document on Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae*, cf. the special issue of Loyola University Law School Journal, Vol. 50, 2018.

tors, too), which makes the *Encyclical Humanae Vitae* all the more disturbing in hindsight: sexual violence, for example, was kept secret by clergy while, at the same time, bishops and popes condemned the secular “culture of death”. While lay Catholics – young people, heterosexual and non-heterosexual couples, and many reformer groups – experienced the liberal cultures as existentially, socially, and politically liberating, they were regularly condemned by their parish priests, bishops, and the popes who continuously shamed and denigrated couples or individuals for not complying with the norms of Catholic sexual morality. It took the Church until 2002 to publicly acknowledge any wrongdoing to the survivors of sexual assaults that as we now know was *structural*; yet up today, the Church has not departed from its naturalistic interpretation of the natural law when it comes to sexuality and gender. As long as the norms of sexuality are centered on a naturalistic or biologicistic understanding, violence, asymmetric domination, and physical or emotional coercion as the sources of moral harm and structural vulnerability cannot even come to the forefront.⁴¹

Under John Paul II and Benedict XVI, the Vatican returned to the pre-Vatican II approach to moral theology, claiming Vatican authority over questions of morality and *demanding* obedience to the “law”, rather than spelling out the moral implications of moral agency. Pope Francis has turned the pages again, but he continues to condemn the “secular” global order for its exploitation and reification of life. His emphasis is not so much on moral theology but on social ethics – from that position, he critiques the Western neoliberalism and capitalism that alienates people rather than liberating them. In contrast to his predecessors who also used strong words in their condemnation of the secular “culture of death”, centered on its liberated sexuality and the permissive laws of abortion, Francis’ critique of late modernity does not call for a return to the triumphant church that is centered around the clergy and/or countering the cultural life of the secular world with the culture of life as alternative vision. Rather, for Francis, the Church must become a “field hospital”, attending to the weak and suffering in the midst of the world’s conflicts, attending to any person’s vulnerabilities and wounds by offering material and spiritual support. At times, he calls the Church to refrain from judging suffering people and preaching to them from a hypocritical standpoint of moral superiority from within the walls of the clerical castle. Yet, like his predecessors, Pope Francis has been slow to acknowledge the structural violence inflicted from within the Church that more often than not is part of the problem and not part of the solution. Applying Francis’ metaphor, one may well say that the Church today is itself the battlefield that kills and harms rather than the field hospital that cures and heals.

41 Cf. chapter 5 in this volume.

Some interpret Francis' turn to the pastoral church as an anti-intellectual turn to praxis. They overlook that practical theology is *also* a discipline within theology that discerns and orients the manifold practices and ministries of the Church. Theological ethics, too, discerns its questions with view on praxis – an ethics that does not stem from practical questions and does not lead back into praxis may be academically interesting, but it cannot be a critical political ethics.

3.3 MORAL PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGICAL ETHICS

Whereas the first generation of Frankfurt School critical theory abstained from a 'positive' justification of morality, the second and third generations, especially Jürgen Habermas and, more recently, Rainer Forst, have claimed that the justification of normative claims is the *core element* of modern moral philosophy and the backbone of an otherwise arbitrary legitimization of political power.⁴² In their view, a postmetaphysical truth theory must be reflective and *intersubjective* or, in Apel's version, *transcendental-pragmatic*.⁴³ Discourse ethics is influenced by the pragmatist tradition, most importantly by Charles S. Peirce, and it aims to discern the necessary regulative ideal of what Habermas calls the communication community. In Habermas' version especially, it is designed as a public political ethics, and because of this, it easily collapses any (ethically relevant) communication into the argumentation and justification of normative claims that participants in (political) deliberations make. For discourse ethics, communication partners must presuppose freedom and reasonableness, and strive for a consensus as the criterion lest participants are coerced to agree to decisions they cannot accept. This means that there are indeed moral criteria for a successful communication that orient political discourses. Yet, when they are *applied*, they are so compromised that it is difficult to see how they can serve the purpose of ensuring the rights of all: for example, in real situations, the discourse rules are to ensure that

42 In the discourse ethics that Habermas developed together with his colleague in Frankfurt, Karl-Otto Apel, they take up the insights of the Pragmatist tradition, especially the philosophy of C.S. Peirce. For a summary of the arguments cf. K.-O. APEL, *Pragmatism as Sense-Critical Realism Based on a Regulative Idea of Truth: In Defense of a Peircean Theory of Reality and Truth*, in: Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society: A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy 37/4 (2001), 443–474. For Habermas' and Forst's works cf. J. HABERMAS, *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics*, Cambridge 1994; R. FORST, *The Right to Justification: Elements of a Constructivist Theory of Justice*, New York 2012.

43 I cannot analyze the difference between Habermas' consensus theory and Apel's transcendental-pragmatic theory here but in my view, only Apel grasps the moral point of view whereas Habermas seems to be too influenced by contract theory and theories of democracy to see the difference between political legitimization and moral justification. Neither of his most prominent students, namely R. Forst and A. Honneth, overcome this problem entirely.

decisions can be shared by all who are affected by the consequences – but this ideal is contradicted in the majority rule guiding liberal democracies.

In contrast to Habermas, Apel is more interested in the moral claims entailed in communication as such: any communication, he argues, entails an inherent, transcendental truth claim that can be laid open reflectively. Speakers cannot but make normative claims to each other, Apel argues, and they can only give up on these claims at the price of a breakdown of any communication. In other words: because agents necessarily interact with others, they must *commit* to the claims they make in their propositions, even though they may correct them upon being proven false or unconvincing; they must be *truthful* in their commitment while trusting that others, too, are not merely arguing strategically. Even if communication partners acknowledge that their commitment stems from a particular position and is historically mediated, the inherent commitment to truthfulness enables them to learn from each other, and this ensures that understanding is possible.⁴⁴ This theory is close to Forst's theory of justification as a right that agents can claim to each other, but it also entails possibilities to link it to the recognition theory of Axel Honneth. Since it is not my purpose here to analyze the implications of discourse ethics and its modifications today, it may suffice to say that discourse ethics tries to build a bridge between legitimate political claims and necessary political compromises on the one hand, and the justification of normative claims on the other; as such, it is an important conversation partner for critical political ethics.

Over the last decades, Catholic theological ethics has engaged in its own reflection on normativity.⁴⁵ In its foundational reflection, theological ethics is not juxtaposed to moral philosophy, as long as it does not reject upfront the anthropological openness to transcendence, but it will critique any political ethics that does not engage ethical questions beyond the justification theory. As critical eth-

44 In this, Apel crucially differs from Charles Taylor's theory of language that is, to say the least, ambivalent regarding the metaphysical basis of moral sources. Cf. CH. TAYLOR, *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity*, Cambridge, MA 2016; CH. TAYLOR, *Sources of the Self*.

45 Cf. for example, the reception of discourse ethics in A. LOB-HÜDEPOHL, *Kommunikative Vernunft und theologische Ethik*, Freiburg i. Ue. 1993; CH. HÜBENTHAL, *Grundlegung einer Sozialethik. Versuch eines freiheitsanalytisch-handlungsreflexiven Ansatzes*, Münster 2006. In my own work, I have tried to discern the relationship of the ethics of the good life and normative ethics through the lens of several theories, including Habermas and Honneth, Taylor, and Ricœur. H. HAKER, *Moralische Identität. Literarische Lebensgeschichten als Medium ethischer Reflexion. Mit einer Interpretation der „Jahrestage“ von Uwe Johnson*, Tübingen 1999. For a historical contextualization cf. CH. MANDRY, *Ethische Identität und christlicher Glaube: Theologische Ethik im Spannungsfeld von Theologie und Philosophie*, Mainz 2002.

ics, theological ethics must necessarily respond to the practices and structures of human rights violations, and this ethical reflection cannot depend on political deliberation procedures only. Under the conditions of real communication, political discourses are embedded in power asymmetries that create structures of injustice; the appeal to an ideal communication does not capture this problem unless the normative dimension of moral agency is spelled out explicitly. From this view, Apel's ethics is better equipped than Habermas' ethics to discern the moral implications of intersubjectivity and interaction. In German theology, the so-called Pröpper school in systematic theology has developed a transcendental theory of freedom that informs theological ethics, too.⁴⁶ Apart from their differences regarding metaphysical and postmetaphysical theories, scholars who follow Metz's political theology, however, reflect on moral claims as a response to suffering and injustice, in the concreteness of historical catastrophes. Critical political ethics seeks to combine the insights of both schools, further informed by a "diatopical" hermeneutics that embraces the plurality of practices of oppression and injustice that call for consideration of feminist, liberationist, and decolonial theologies.

In an effort to offer a "map" to the discipline of ethics, I have distinguished in some other works among four intersecting spheres of ethical reflection, and I still think that the distinction and intersection among them is important to consider in any ethical inquiry. In the first sphere, ethics reflects on a person's identity with respect to values, commitments, and goods that orient their actions and which are reflected in the existential imagination of a good life, shaping moral identity over time.⁴⁷ In the second sphere, it reflects on the social mediations of these identities and imageries, for example applying the social character theory that Erich Fromm described as the crossover of personal and social values,⁴⁸ or applying the habitus theory that Pierre Bourdieu developed as a critical reinterpretation of the theory of virtues.⁴⁹ Social values and norms reflect orders of communities, cultures, and polities individuals belong to, creating different dynamics of inclusion and exclusion and informing individual and collective actions in particular con-

46 TH. PRÖPPER, *Autonomie und Solidarität. Begründungsprobleme sozioethischer Verpflichtung*, in: *Jahrbuch für Christliche Sozialwissenschaften* 36 (2012), 11–27; M. WIRTH, *Mitigated Freedom? Thomas Pröpper's Reappraisal as Theological Tribute to Autonomy*, in: *Theology Today* 75/4 (2019), 494–503.

47 Cf. among others, CH. TAYLOR, *Sources of the Self*. I have explored the concept in conversation with several authors, including Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, Charles Taylor, Hans Krämer, and Paul Ricœur in: H. HAKER, *Moralische Identität*.

48 E. FROMM, *Social Character in a Mexican Village*, Piscataway, NJ 1970.

49 P. BOURDIEU, *The Logic of Practice*, Stanford 1990.

texts and at particular moments in history. Michel Foucault's method of genealogy is indispensable for the analyses in this sphere. In the third sphere, ethics reflects on the normative principles and justifications that define the rights and responsibilities of moral agents, and in the fourth sphere of ethical reflection, the required institutions and/or structures that enable individuals and/or groups to self-govern and participate in the world they share are addressed. In this sphere, the question of law and justice returns: politically speaking, laws and regulations shape the institutional structures of a polity while morally speaking, laws must be oriented towards and guided by the principle of justice.⁵⁰

Papal Encyclicals often invoke the social-ethical principles of human dignity, solidarity and subsidiarity, and the principle of justice is interpreted through the concept of the common good.⁵¹ In the more recent past, the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable has been added, and the principle of participatory justice is invoked by social ethicists.⁵² However, while these "principles" are often named, their status is completely unclear; often, they only function as normative reference points or orientations for moral judgments. For example, justice is not a separate principle, the elements of prudence do not appear (although Francis mentions them in his Encyclical *Laudato Si*), and the relation between the principles is not clarified. Furthermore, they are rarely structured in view of the four intersecting spheres of moral reasoning that I consider helpful to discern on what level moral judgments are made. When scholars ask critical questions, the response is often that these are meant as orientations for Bishops and their pastoral-moral work. On the other hand, some of the encyclicals tend to have a higher status than others, for example, John Paul II's encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (among others, on abortion) has been much more broadly received than his *Laboram Exercens*, on the rights of workers, the dignity of work and the importance of solidarity.⁵³ Here, the emphasis on agency, agents' necessary participation in social ac-

50 For a thorough argument of these four spheres of ethics cf. H. HAKER, *Ethik der genetischen Frühdiagnostik. Sozialethische Reflexionen zur Verantwortung am menschlichen Lebensbeginn*, Paderborn 2002, chapter 1.

51 D. HOLLENBACH, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge, UK/New York 2002.

52 Ironically and sadly, these principles that by now summarize the core of Catholic Social Teaching, are as often evoked by the Popes as they are practically ignored and violated. They are dismissed as inapplicable in the only sphere of influence Popes have real control over, namely in the Catholic Church. For a synthesis of Catholic Social Teaching cf. PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana Vatican/Washington 2004, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justice-peace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html.

53 John Paul II's obviously was influenced by his experiences in Poland, in which the Solidarnosc Movement inspired many other social movements of the late 20th century, and not the least the

tions and organized action in unions and other organizations in order to shape political decisions on different levels, all point to the public sphere as the forum for political-ethical deliberation. Yet, the role of theological ethics in the public sphere is less than clear, especially given the fact that “religion” is often defined in view of theories of the secular state that grant religious liberty to its members but that do not have a good theory of the civil sphere.⁵⁴ The claim that “religion” must be able to politically participate in public debates obviously raises the question of representation and points back to the plurality of values and voices that are mirrored in the different procedures of decision-making.

3.4 THE END OF NORMATIVE ETHICS?

Just as political liberalism became the subject of critique and deconstruction over the last decades, normative moral claims, too, are regarded with suspicion today. Postmodern and poststructural theories, for example, hold that the justification of norms must either be *deferred* indefinitely (Derrida), or it is contingent on the factual truth regimes, i. e. the “norms of intelligibility” that we cannot escape as discursive constraints. Far from being universalistic, they can always be traced back in genealogies of particular truth regimes (Foucault). When moral philosophy invokes human rights or any other universal claims, an unjustifiable metaphysics or theology always seems to loom in the background, especially in the form of a normative claim about human nature. Furthermore, insofar as modernity’s normative ideal of ‘human nature’ mirrored the white European male, it rendered everyone else to be ‘deviant’, ‘not yet’ at the same stage, or simply the ‘other’, e. g. the ‘other sex’, as Simone de Beauvoir famously held. Feminist, postcolonial, and postmodern thinkers alike point to this forgotten foundation of the moral edifice of modern moral thought that had disastrous ramifications for global colonial and patriarchal politics. However, especially postsecular theologians argue, just as the secular political power regimes conceal their arbitrary source of power, secular ethics, too, seems to ignore its blind spot: the invisible, secret, undeclared foundation of morality in transcendence. Postmodern theology has also declared the “death of God” as the death of the triumphant, ontotheological sovereign, while it rarely speaks of its own normative sources. It is then either left with a negation of any truth claim, the emphasis on contingency that opens the door to arbitrariness of moral claims, or it embraces a habitus of skepticism and resignation. Moral actions become decisionist, and the most likely

Eastern European reform movement that ultimately brought down the authoritarian communist Soviet Union.

54 Cf. J. C. ALEXANDER, *The Civil Sphere*, Oxford/New York 2006; J. BUTLER/E. MENDIETA/J. VAN ANTWERPEN, *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, New York 2011.

stance regarding the struggle for liberation towards justice is that of the ironic commentator.⁵⁵

Unfortunately, the postmodern critique of modernity is a mirror image of the antimodern critique of Catholic (or other Christian) traditionalists. While postmodern theorists aim to unmask the hypocrisy of modernity, this points to modernity's debt to a metaphysical truth. According to traditionalist theologians, Christian theology's task is to offer a foundational structure that is easily lost in the "pursuit of happiness" that merely seems to serve a person's self-interest.⁵⁶ Hence, they strive to re-establish the connection between human reason and divine law. For postmodern thinkers, in contrast, the end of any "ultimate" normativity requires the constant self-critique in action as well as the poetic creation of one's identity.⁵⁷

4. *Catholic Social Ethics as Critical Political Ethics*

What the discussion so far has shown is that political theology and ethical theory raise similar, yet not identical questions. A critical political ethics that is akin to political theology, yet subjects it to its own disciplinary focus, must avoid the pitfalls of some theories and overcome the shortcoming of others. It can, for example, embrace the critique of "secular" legitimacy, but it cannot opt for a political-theological *decisionism* – if it does, it cannot be developed as a *critical ethics*, because it simply lacks a normative criterion for its critique. Alternatively, it may adopt the postmodern radical critique of normativity and focus on the critical deconstruction of truth claims, or on genealogies of concepts that contribute to the different truth regimes.⁵⁸ This option is taken up by many poststructuralist phi-

55 Cf. R. RORTY, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge, MA 1989. Postmodern ethics may take a different cue from the "existentialist" ethics that Albert Camus developed in the 1940s. This ethics is an attempt to escape the idealism of liberation struggles while drawing the motivational force to act strictly from the situational necessity. Cf. A. CAMUS, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, London 2013.

56 This strategy is, for example, used by theologians who emphasize the commonalities between the natural law theory and the modern human rights theory, as the International Theological Commission, for example, does, without, however, pointing to the theological foundation of moral claims in divine law, as revealed in scripture and tradition. INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, *In Search of a Universal Ethic: A New Look at the Natural Law*, Vatican 2009, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20090520_legge-naturale_en.html.

57 Cf. M. FOUCAULT, *What is Critique?*, in: S. LOTRINGER (ed.), *The Politics of Truth*, Los Angeles, CA 2007 (orig. 1978), 41–81.

58 Derrida has offered multiple works that concretize deconstruction, e. g. of forgiveness, of justice, or universalism more general; Foucault has offered major works on truth regimes, e. g. concerning sexuality, madness, punishment, of policing. Both "paths" are indispensable for any eth-

losophers today – yet, while it can indeed be developed as a *critical* theology, it is not clear how it can motivate political action that functions, at the same time, as an ethical end that agents *believe* and therefore *engage* in: if all acts are entangled in webs of power, the question is whether one can commit at all to the projects of liberation or transformation of injustice into justice. The critical stance may indeed result in a merely reflective, ‘ironic’ stance that rather paralyzes agents than motivating them to engage at all. The realization of ‘absurdity’ may result in a radically personal ethics (Camus), but this is hard to imagine as a political ethics that, among others, is committed to structural and institutional change. With the late Foucault, ethics could focus on self-formation, trying to resist normative conformism as best as possible; but this ethics would still collapse into an *aesthetics* of poietic self-creation, rather than an ethics of freedom as a task of identity and/or liberation. It is hard to see how the concern for the other, which is the core of moral agency, can inform this poietic ethics of self care without a separate reflection on the moral claims to one’s existential ethics.

Apart from the authoritarian political theology and postmodern ethics, a third option has emerged in the discussion of a postmetaphysical ethics, which allows for commitment *and* immanent critique and therefore seems most akin to my approach. This is clearly warranted for the further development of an ethics that is grounded in the concept of freedom. Critical political ethics can neither retrieve a theology of the sovereign God nor a theology of history that is teleological in the sense, for example, of a progress history. Over against the postmetaphysical ethics that Habermas, Apel, or Forst pursue, however, my approach emphasizes that a procedural ethics is not enough either: a theory that centers on rules of communication and/or justification of normative claims does not reflect upon all four spheres of ethics; likewise, the obligation to justification is not yet a theory of justice that address the structural and institutional injustices. Both approaches conflate the requirements of political theory and moral theory, and this is an impossible stance for an ethics that is guided by the emergency of suffering and/or the vulnerability of those whose rights are violated. Instead of narrowing normativity to formal rules of conduct, the moral “law” (nomos) that binds the self (autos) informs one’s own moral agency and moral identity as a moral task of freedom and liberation. If critical political ethics follows the *reflective* or transcendental justification of normative claims, it can reject a principle of morality that

ical or political analysis and must therefore be taken up by a Christian ethics. They certainly offer a methodology that is akin to Adorno’s “negative critique” that the ‘new political theology’ embraced. However, Derrida and Foucault never clarified the relation between critical *analyses* and normative *claims* they nevertheless make, rendering their own strategies of justification arbitrary and at times immune to critique.

resembles the quasi-theological legitimization of politics. Morality does not only rest upon freedom that is necessarily presupposed in any action – it also rests upon the different kinds of vulnerabilities that different people and groups face. In line with Adorno's negative dialectics and Metz's claim to *negative universalism*, for a critical *political* ethics, the 'other' (or others) whose dignity and rights are violated are not only the *criterion* but also the *priority* that must guide political action. Critical political ethics therefore attends in its analyses to the lack of *actual* freedom of concrete others, or the lack of freedom in particular states of vulnerability.

Finally, critical political ethics is political in acknowledging that neither the mere pointing to norms or laws that should transform structures but often do not succeed in doing so, nor the actions of individuals *alone* can bring about the necessary change.⁵⁹ Respect, recognition, and commitment to act must be actualized in the solidarity *among* those who suffer from the structural injustice of the current normative orders, and in the solidarity *with* them – expressed in the social movements that increasingly join forces on a global scale.⁶⁰

4.1 CRITICAL POLITICAL ETHICS:

ETHICS OF FREEDOM AND LIBERATION TOWARDS JUSTICE

In theological thinking, the liberation from oppression, told in the narrative of the Exodus from Egypt, has been interpreted as a path towards salvation, which Christian theology, Catholic and Protestant, spelled out since early modernity as political-theological salvation in its respective missionary work. As a result, Christian missionaries became entangled with the history of colonialism, and they often paved the way for political conquests. Critical political ethics acknowledges that Western *Christian* theology provided the narrative that entails, among others, the "racial contract", as Charles Mills has called it,⁶¹ i. e. the glowing imagery of the "promised land" or, in the case of the American national identity that I alluded to in the beginning of this chapter, the imagery of the "new chosen people". Like the continental-European colonization depicted its conquest as a mission to civilize and evangelize the "savages" and "heathens", the Anglo-American emigrants to the New World cultivated a notion of white supremacy that was deeply intertwined with their Christian faith.⁶² Critical political ethics must therefore break with a teleological theology or philosophy of history, be it in the

59 Cf. for a concept that spells out the difficulty to hold persons accountable for structures of injustice, yet upholds social and collective responsibility by way of a model social connection I. M. YOUNG, *Responsibility for Justice*, Oxford 2011.

60 Cf. chapter 13 in this volume.

61 CH. W. MILLS, *The Racial Contract*.

62 K. BROWN DOUGLAS, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*, Maryknoll, NY 2015.

name of a salvation history guided by God's providence, the legitimization of conquest by way of a civilization of development project, or a Marxian understanding of the working class as agents of universal history. All these concepts of history are untenable; after all, they ignore that the philosophy of history with its teleological imagery of history as progress is shaped by the colonial and chauvinist approach to 'other' religions, cultures, and times; merely reversing it so that the once-oppressed now become the actors of history does not escape the pitfalls of universal history so envisioned. Metz sensed the problematic of such a theology of history, and he therefore strived to retrieve an apocalyptic eschatology as an alternative to the teleological theology of history. The underlying problem, however, remains; it concerns the question of human freedom and hope in liberation from suffering and, ultimately, death.

For ethics, the concept of freedom is crucial, but looking at the multiple works that grapple with this core concept of human subjectivity and, hence, modernity, critical political ethics must maintain the following four dimensions of freedom: first, Kant rightly showed that freedom is the foundational, transcendental concept of morality which defines moral agency as moral autonomy; second, the existentialist interpretation from Kierkegaard to Simone de Beauvoir, Sartre, and Camus, are correct to emphasize that freedom is an existential concept of moral identity, i. e. an infinite existential task to become oneself.⁶³ Third, freedom is always more than individual freedom, although it cannot be other than personal. Axel Honneth, among others, has newly spelled out the concept of social freedom that enables individuals to interact with each other in interpersonal and collective actions, oriented towards mutual recognition and political justice.⁶⁴ From a critical perspective, however, freedom means, fourth, the struggle for liberation from violations of human dignity and structures of violence, which connects it both to the theology of liberation and to the theory of recognition, insofar as the latter addresses the multiple struggles for equal respect.

Critical political ethics embraces the concept of freedom from these four perspectives – transcendental, existential, social, and political – and relates them to the aforementioned spheres of ethical reflection: while freedom is, as Kantian or Neo-Kantian ethics argue, a transcendental condition of moral agency, critical

63 For the Kierkegaardian origin of this existential ethics as an ethics of freedom cf. J. HABERMAS, *The Future of Human Nature*, Cambridge, UK 2003.

64 Even though I share much of the critique of Honneth's concept who has not succeeded to provide with a moral theory of intersubjectivity that goes beyond the reciprocity of ultimately self-centered actors, I do believe that the concept of social freedom itself can be modified to meet the standards of mutual recognition. Paul Ricœur has also begun this work in his last major books, and it may be a big step forward for the further development of a Christian (social) ethics. Cf. A. HONNETH, *Freedom's Right*; P. RICŒUR, *The Course of Recognition*, Cambridge, MA 2006.

political ethics also emphasizes *existential* freedom as the task of moral identity. Freedom and agency cannot be conceived without attention to the conditions that constrain or enable their actualization. Hence, social and cultural norms, but also political institutions must be constantly scrutinized for structures that prevent freedom or, in other words, structures that prevent justice to be defined as equality of all. Furthermore, as a Christian ethics, critical political ethics embraces the critique of political *and* ecclesial practices that contradict the *theological* understanding of freedom as liberation towards justice. Critical political ethics will therefore critique any interpretation, any norms, structures and institutions that prevent individuals from actualizing and practicing their moral agency, and it will critique any authoritarian justification of morality which transforms political/ecclesial power into the power *over* moral agents. Critical political ethics critiques *any* subjection and oppression in the name of freedom and liberation, grounding its claims in the human dignity and human rights of every human being, the protection of which *ought to be* the responsibility of any moral agent and any institution.⁶⁵

4.2 CRITICAL POLITICAL ETHICS AS THEOLOGICAL ETHICS

While moral philosophy discerns moral questions as justification of judgments, theological ethics (and all religious, if not in fact all ethics) shows how they are – and can be – situated in concrete histories and traditions. Christian theology refers to its own, partly Jewish, tradition of biblical narratives, poetry, and liturgical rituals that accompany the personal and communal practices of faith. Theology is bound to and bound by its own *language* that one must learn to understand. Therefore, critical political ethics is necessarily connected to a hermeneutical theology, a theory of understanding, interpretation, and translation. Christian theology cannot prove the existence of God with scientific methods, let alone empirically. Still, the method of historical criticism that today includes archaeology, linguistic studies, and history, is necessary and helpful in order to guide the necessarily creative *interpretation* of the tradition. Theology constantly *re-narrates* the story of God who has made herself intelligible throughout history, thereby constructing a continuity between the past and the present. Ethics must consider this relation explicitly, and through it, ethics may develop a new understanding of

65 A promising approach has been recently proposed by Linda Zerilli who explores a theory of political judgment that is not based on shared values but on the plural voices within the one “shared world”, building upon Arendt’s theory of judgment, arguing for the “polis” as the space for disputes and actions: L. M. G. ZERILLI, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment*, Chicago 2016. This approach is close to Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza’s understanding of the “katholikos” or a non-kyriarchial ecclesia. Cf. E. SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA, *Transforming Vision*.

theology that is sensitive to its own history. All the metaphors we may use for God – the sovereign, the ruler, the king as well as the liberator, the parent, or the judge – ultimately point back to the narrator, the story-teller, the translator of a history that only exists *as* history in the story that is told in the present. Ultimately, no image of God captures God, nor should that even be the goal of theology. Instead, language is the human way of interpreting one's unique and existential identity-in-relation, while creating the web of social belonging over time that includes human openness to transcendence.

Since understanding is necessarily historical, contextual, and 'interested' or engaged, the images of God found in the tradition must be examined, potentially critiqued, potentially contested, or reinterpreted. A critical hermeneutics can help theological ethics (if not all ethics) to unlearn the empire imageries of the divine and replace them with better images. It will be in part *critical* (of the imageries of the theological tradition), in part *political* (of political orders that legitimize political power theologically), and *deconstructive* with respect to theology's reading of the tradition. However, because critical political ethics, as Christian ethics, is bound by the memory of God's bond with human history, it is also an engaged or 'interested' ethics that is committed to the (unfulfilled, often shattered) promises of the past, *constructive* and *creative* in envisioning new practices, new structures of social action, and potentially new institutional governance structures that are liberating rather than cementing the existing asymmetries among individuals, groups, and nations. Then, perhaps it is necessary to emphasize that the *moral* anthropocentrism of critical political ethics is strictly a moral concept, concerning the subjects of responsibility as moral agents, but certainly not the addressees and objects of responsibility: moral agency demands to "care for the common home", planet earth, which theology calls God's creation as a reminder that moral responsibility does not end with the care for other human beings. Human agency must involve the care for sustaining the very resources that are the sources of life, human and non-human alike.

An ethical theory that is open to critique due to the multitude of perspectives will need to attend to a *diatopical hermeneutics* – a hermeneutics that embraces the multiple social, cultural, religious, and epistemological contexts that inform people's and peoples' conversations and interpretation of reality.⁶⁶ This is possible without reference to a metaphysical theology of history or to the vision of a savior nation that "liberates" other nations by force. Rather, the global political movements of the 20th century and of today show that the political task – and challenge – of critical political ethics is to stand in solidarity with the multiple

66 I adopt this term from Boaventura de Sousa Santos. Cf. B. DE SOUSA SANTOS, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide*, Boulder, CO 2014.

contextual, yet global movements of liberation from injustice and liberation towards justice.

4.3 CRITICAL POLITICAL ETHICS AS REFLECTION ON PRACTICES

In the 17th century, a popular image showed “Lady World” who in the front was beautiful and fashionable while rotting in ugliness in her back, being eaten away by worms and death. The (Protestant) religion-inspired “mourning plays” of the time responded to the devastation of the Thirty Years War (1628-1648), which destroyed much of Europe, with a political theology that urged the submission to God, the true sovereign of history, as salvation from the hubris of the world. The historical analysis of early modern and modern Protestant Christian political theology must attend to the blending of this sovereign God with the Anglo-Saxon myth of the ‘white Man’s’ supremacy that has shaped especially the American identity from the 17th to the 20th century – and beyond.⁶⁷ Promoting the myth of the “new chosen people” and embracing modern political theology as the theology of the Sovereign God, Christians stood on both sides: they could identify the philosophy of historical progress with the theology of salvation while critiquing the secular foundation of the polity in the social contract with Christianity’s own understanding of the natural law as the metaphysical, divine foundation of the polity.⁶⁸ When the more recent discourse on political theology emerged, it pointed to the blending of the premodern image of the omniscient, omnipotent, and sovereign God who is above the human law and beyond history with the political powers in Western liberal democracies. However, the modern colonial empires soon had no need for a divine emperor. They replaced divine power with human power, sparked by inventions, discoveries, the development of new technologies, and finally evolutionary biology. Nevertheless, this rather cynical reading of human freedom still rests upon the belief that there is a straight line from the liberalism of the 17th century to the libertarianism of the 20th and 21st that threatens to destroy the social cohesion of more and more societies.

Yet, this is not the *only* story of modernity: like the European world responded to the Thirty Years War with the Westphalian Order, the United Nations responded to the atrocities of Hitler’s Nazism, the war, and the atom bombs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki with an aspirational framework that insisted on the universality of individual human rights, on the moral and political responsibilities to secure and

67 E. P. KAUFMANN, *The Rise and Fall of Anglo-America*, Cambridge, MA 2004. For an actual account in light of the current racism in the US, cf. K. BROWN DOUGLAS, *Stand Your Ground*.

68 This distinction matters; even John Rawls, who some want to see as late defender of natural law, ultimately departs from the metaphysical concept of liberalism and replaces it explicitly with *political* liberalism that is grounded in contract theory.

promote these rights and to establish a national and international legal structure that would prevent the world from ever experiencing a world war like the one that had just ended. In this paradigm, historical memory and a diatopical hermeneutics tie the normative claims to concrete histories and contexts, including the plurality of religions. Different religions are treated as equals in the Human Rights Declaration, and *all* believers are guaranteed the right to religious freedom. The notion of supremacy – of ethnicity or “race”, sex, a nation, or religion – is dismissed on moral, not on religious grounds. Following this human rights ethics, theology must take the vulnerable, yet responsible self as the starting point and center of its ethics. Therefore, my approach is grounded in the vulnerable agency of the individual, unique human being. Yet, this emphasis on the individual leads back to the practices of communities, non-religious or religious: for Christian theology, it means that discipleship entails the commitment to the engagement for freedom and justice, which emerges in communities of solidarity.

Our current culture, economy, and science still follow the philosophy of history as progress history. Hence, the present embraces a plethora of utopian ideas of human freedom, from overcoming human nature through transhumanist technologies, overcoming death through the biomedical quest for immortality, expanding memory, or broadening the ecological space of the earth by conquering space. In spite of these utopian dreams which today are mostly tied to new technologies, there is ample evidence of a reality that is not addressed in these utopias: for billions of people, the earth is no space where they can live, or live a minimally good life, despite the availability of technological and financial means and despite political institutions that could secure their human rights. Women, men, and children still starve, many are deprived of education and work, many have no shelter, and they have no addressee for claiming their rights. Women and girls especially are vulnerable to sexualized violence. For all these people who live on the dark side of the planet – not the geographical side but the *moral* forgotten side – the *declaration* of human rights seventy years ago promised hope for their own lives, or for the lives of their loved ones. The “state of emergency” that Schmitt referred to as the moment when the sovereign’s power is demonstrated, does not need to be declared – seen from most places on earth, it is an ongoing emergency. While critical political ethics acknowledges that theology is diatopical, speaking from different *contexts*, it also acknowledges that people speak and act from different *positions* of power, and it acknowledges that billions of people are overlooked and ignored in their cries for justice, human dignity, and human rights.

Critical theory has not lost any of its actuality: moral and political theory requires a different stance than the instrumental reason that has become the second nature of “Western” or “Westernized” globalization. Being one voice among others in the critique of injustice and repression and oppression of freedom and moral agency, Christian ethics needs to develop a new theology of history. It must distance itself from the colonial interpretation of salvation history or the secularized version of historical progress; instead of depicting a new utopian universal history, critical political ethics must help to foster political virtues that help agents to engage in concrete actions and practices of social movements – and discern new virtues from the experiences of social, political actions. Theology’s task is to deliberate how the hopes for the present and future can transform the institutional structures responsible for the harms identified in the experiences of those to whom they are inflicted.

Critical political ethics analyzes the alienation that is a result of the habitual social, political, and economic reification. What Marx called the opium of the people, namely religion, today is the economic worldview that fosters a throw-away consumerism in secularized capitalist societies that ultimately also includes the ‘wasted lives’ of human beings, as Zygmunt Bauman has called this dynamic;⁶⁹ over the last two centuries, this worldview has been put in practice, and it is rapidly destroying sustainable life on the planet. It is this *habitus* that may prevent people from pushing politicians who ultimately ought to work for the common good of the people to make radical changes. Maybe it is even difficult to envision alternatives to the epistemological, ethical, and political paradigm we all live by. Today, the people and peoples who are harmed most by the global order of economic, social, and ecological destruction may not be too impressed by the transhumanist dreams of Silicon Valley that are centered on the unhinged desires of a few wealthy people or groups who work on their own immortality; the vast majority of people who live today have little to win from such new dreams of transcending human finitude. Political-ethical critique calls such utopias cynical; more than anything else, they point to the radical moral crisis of the West – the crisis that goes back to its roots, the *radix* of Western misunderstanding that utilized Christian theology and ethics for the domination of the earth, namely that God’s summons to *care* for the earth included the permission to *conquer* and *destroy* it.⁷⁰ The above-mentioned diatopical hermeneutics becomes most relevant when people cannot see beyond their horizons, when alternative ways of thinking and living seem impossible.

69 Z. BAUMAN, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts*, Oxford/Malden, MA 2004.

70 Sometimes it is said that this confusion goes back to a “translation mistake” of Genesis 1.28 but this is merely one more excuse for the moral failure of Western philosophy, theology, and colonial politics.

To give but one example for the contribution of theology in particular, I want to point to my own experience of academic work, namely with the editors of the journal *Concilium* that has shaped my own thinking considerably: this journal is not only diatopical, i. e. speaking from multiple perspectives and locations, helping me to unlearn the habitus of eurocentrism and coloniality that I can only strive to overcome.⁷¹ It is also *kaleidoscopic* in its treatment of theological topics: theology becomes a colorful depiction of the world, with its images shifting and changing over time, yet always entailing the same ingredients of the biblical and theological tradition, reason, or historical experience by the subjects of theology. If theology provides kaleidoscopic snapshots that stem from multiple locations and have been created over time, these are certainly tentative, contingent, and fallible efforts to do theology. However, this does not render the works less committed to the witnessing of faith, the narrating of love, and the expression of hope that injustice and suffering are not the last word, than a theology that claims to possess the exclusive authority to discern the truth of faith and morality.

Speaking for myself, from my own particular position in the West and from my rather comfortable position at a university, I acknowledge that it is my responsibility to use my freedom and talents for the overall struggle against injustice.⁷² Critical political ethics certainly must listen to the victims of history and their stories, making place and providing the space for them in the forum of Western politics, theology, and academia that have ignored and excluded them. However, the virtue of listening may quickly turn into a gesture of benevolence, reiterating the paternalistic, benevolent attitude of the *white Christian savior* who listens to the “poor” instead of recognizing them as agents in their own right – agents who are waiting for a response to their questions and questioning. Marginalized people and groups are indeed the normative axis – the *authority of theology*, in Metz’s term – who must guide all moral actions; but they are never *only* the suffering, marginalized victims who are *only* vulnerable, as if they lacked agency.⁷³ Critical political ethics’ task in the West is to remind theologians, policymakers, CEOs, universities, or Church leaders that in the biblical tradition, the prophets address those with power in a different way than those who are the victims of

71 W. MIGNOLO, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*, Durham, NC 2018.

72 While this statement is put in abstract terms, the essays in this volume offer a selection of some of the material works in social and political ethics that I have worked on over the last years.

73 Strikingly, while many liberation theologians interpret the preferential option for the poor to mean that the poor and vulnerable are subjects who are placed at the center of social action, the Vatican (and Catholic theologians, too) often interpret the option *for* the poor literally, i. e. as the benevolent attitude that “brings” the “poor” to the table of the “wealthy”, which does not require the latter to change either their position or perspective.

structural violence. Today, whites, Christians, and/or Westerners are urged to respond to the call for *teshuva* or *metanoia* (the *transformation* of our habits and practices), because we are the ones who stand in the way to new beginnings. If we do so, new hope may well arise. Theology reminds both sides, those who have harmed and continue to harm, and those who have been and continue to be harmed, that a new beginning is promised and possible at any moment, despite any previous wrongdoing and despite all the wounds. The critique of critical political ethics is rooted in the prophetic passion for the work of transforming injustice into justice, and the conviction that human actions are effective and can indeed bring about change.

In contrast to the quietism of those who have already given up on hope – and given up on the God of freedom, too – critical political ethics aims to retrieve and recreate new forms of social agency that translate into political action. It cannot call upon God to “fix the mess” we have made of the planet and our “common home”, but it can still *address* God, in the confession of guilt, the psalms of lament, or in the re-narrating of the biblical stories that warn of the catastrophes when people lose their moral compasses – both before and after these catastrophes. Politically and practically, critical political ethics can develop a vision of social agency and work on concrete strategies of social and political action, in close collaboration with the sciences and humanities. In doing this, critical political ethics will press for action plans that involve those as agents who have the power to act, and those who are most urgently in need of structural change and know best what they need. Especially, action plans that respond to the biggest crisis we face today, namely the climate crisis, may enable corporations, cooperatives, and communities to engage in responsible stewardship and care for each other as well as for the earth. Critical political ethics is not naïve: it will require struggles for justice, and these will need motivational work, the formation and internalization of political virtues such as compassion and solidarity, and the sensitization for injustice. *Political* theology that starts in the streets is a theology of the weekdays. *Political theology*, however, reminds Christians that the weekdays point to the Sabbath, just as the Sundays point to ever-new beginnings of the weeks.

There is no need for theology to create utopian visions of hope. However, at moments of personal and/or social hopelessness, theology upholds the hope that emerges from the negation of the negative. It cannot provide *one* response but rather, it will generate *multiple* responses to the moral crises of our time by including as many viewpoints as possible. Furthermore, ethics cannot offer the answer to “the” meaning of human existence, because this is the task of every human being. Christian ethics can continue to tell the story of past human experiences and past interpretations of God which point to a future that is yet to come. It is an experience-oriented ethics that engages with people who have not given up on an

existentially meaningful life, while attending and responding to the lives of others. As a theological ethics, it cannot speak of God as an abstract concept of faith, and it cannot fall silent in view of the mystery of God: not to *know* God does not mean that one cannot *speak* to God and about how humans experience God in history. For Christians, God's mystery is the incarnation in Jesus Christ. God's mystery is the life-giving Spirit that reminds us why faith means struggling for liberation towards justice. The reason for hope is the expectation of the kingdom of God.

The stories of the forefathers and foremothers of faith do not mirror the passive, obedient recipients of God's Word that Kierkegaard's Abraham, for example, embodies: often, they refused to choose between the love of God and the love of humans, and again and again, they were remembered as the true believers of God. They engaged God in conversations and disputes, thereby emphasizing that to be related to God means to engage in communications that take multiple different forms: Abraham's wife, Sarah, laughed at God when she was promised new life; Abraham negotiated the fate of Sodom with God; Jacob wrestled with the Angel of God. Most prophets first refused to speak in the name of God, and they often wrestled with the news they were to bring to their people. The stories of women in the bible are full of subversive wit, too: Delilah is remembered for outsmarting the man whom she was supposed to obey, just as Tamar outsmarted her father-in-law. Even the central symbol of obedience in Western Catholicism, Mary, was anything but passive, instead invoking Hannah's song that promised to throw the powerful from their throne in the Magnificat.

Having grown up in the Western, German part of the world when Germany's destruction had already become history again, any talk of political theology that includes obedience without recourse to dissent, disobedience, and freedom of conscience is impossible for me – and this includes the leadership of the Catholic Church that may well differ from secular leadership but certainly is not exempt from human fallibility. Any talk of God as the sovereign leader of world history is tainted by modern history. More importantly, however, speaking of God as an authority whom humans must *succumb* to insults the God of the Bible: this God must not be associated, either by name, by connotation, or by the notion of representation, with the political theology of the sovereign leader. My approach is therefore critical in both directions: it is critical of any political theology that legitimizes power of governance by invoking the name of God. The political theology of critical theory, in contrast, points to the God who stands in solidarity with us, the human beings. Solidarity, the Latin language says, creates a bond that itself creates the trust that God has our backs – and this bond is the opposite of a chain that keeps us from exploring our finite, fragile, yet creative freedom.

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