

ROMAN CATHOLICISM AND POLITICAL FORM (CARL SCHMITT)

May 17, 2022

If, as Carl Schmitt asserted in *Political Theology*, “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts,” what does that imply for political forms? This book, written immediately after *Political Theology*, addresses that question. Schmitt analyzes a political form that originated as theological but has adopted many different secular roles—the Roman Catholic Church. I have to say that *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, even by Schmittian standards, is a difficult read. Nonetheless, it rewards close attention and thought, because what Schmitt says is, as all things Schmitt are, surprisingly relevant to our situation today.

What he definitely does not advocate is that the Church should rule. Schmitt, the seer of sovereignty, would vomit at the cut-rate, ahistorical, fed-friendly “integralism” that, most prominently, Adrian Vermeule likes to push, and he would think little more of the somewhat more sensible modern men who think that what we really need now is an updated Pope Innocent III. Rather, Schmitt believes the political form of the Church is instructive for a Europe in turmoil (he is only concerned about Europe here), and that the Church can play a key role in European governance. No more, and no less.

It does not matter that the Church analyzed by Schmitt in this book, that is, its political form (and most of its theological form, though that is beside the main point), is dead and gone in the Year of Our Lord 2022. What matters is the insights in this book, which can be read as a perceptive and preemptive attack on managerialism, a system that turned out to be the main organizing principle of the twentieth century. Thus, to my surprise, this book is closely tied in substance to James Burnham’s *The Managerial Revolution*. A complete comparison of the two books would try my readers’ patience, and is probably beyond my mental capacity, so I will not do that today, though the reader might benefit from reading the two books together. I will merely point out Schmitt does not disagree that managerialism, what he calls “economic-technical thinking,” is on the rise. Rather, he thinks it inadequate to meet the political needs of the future, unlike Burnham, who thought (incorrectly, as it turned out)

that managerialism was the inevitable solution to modern complexity. Burnham, who rejected any role for any moral or religious thought in political forms, necessarily offers a much less sophisticated (if easier to understand) view of political institutions than does Schmitt.

Roman Catholicism and Political Form is obscure, first translated into English only in 1996, and issued in only one edition (even though it is more of a long essay than a book). Unlike many of Schmitt's other works, you will find little third-party commentary on this book, at least in English. The translator and annotator, G. L. Ulmen (a man of immense erudition, about whom I can find no other information other than that he has done many Schmitt translations—I am not even sure if he is still alive), says that this book forms a bridge from Schmitt's earlier works that analyze the sovereign state, towards his later conception of "the political," that is, the friend-enemy grouping," as more important, more existential, than the state itself. This is plausible, but mostly I think *Roman Catholicism and Political Form* stands alone as a glimpse into how, in Schmitt's own mind, personal religiosity intersected with his political theories.

Roman Catholicism and Political Form is the only one of Schmitt's books in which his Catholic religious belief materially colors his political analysis. Schmitt was, for many purposes, an admirer of Thomas Hobbes, and he often used Hobbes as a type of sounding board for his own thought. Hobbes was not a wholly orthodox Christian, but it is key to Schmitt's thinking here what he said much later (in a quote offered by Ulmen, from an otherwise untranslated article): "The most important statement of Thomas Hobbes remains: Jesus is the Christ. Such a statement retains its power even when it is relegated to the margins of an intellectual construct, even when it appears to have been banished to the outer reaches of the conceptual system." At root, it seems, Schmitt believed not only that the Roman Church was a crucial political form, but that it was unique, because what it says is true. You cannot understand this book unless you grasp that claim.

This religious cast enhances, rather than limits, the book. One of the many intellectual inheritances we lost over the course of the twentieth century was a proper appreciation of the intersection of religious thinking and politics. The assumption today is either that the two are irrelevant to each other, or that religion poisons politics. Tedious and

false histories of religious wars are offered to show we must be ruled by so-called liberal democracy, which is anti-religious in its nature, and therefore nobody explores what religion, both historically and intellectually, means for politics. Except for Schmitt—who in this as in everything else, isn't even on the same planet with modern political philosophers, mostly mentally-defective nobodies such as John Rawls.

The immediate political backdrop is also important here. Catholicism was, in a way not comprehensible to modern Americans, a major political force in 1920s Germany. Most explicitly this was through the Centre Party, with which Schmitt was associated at the time, and which was an open vehicle for applied Catholic thought. Aside from the Centre Party, however, Catholics as Catholics were very highly influential in all areas of ruling class intellectual life—not just in politics, but in everything from art to history. We now think of a “Catholic thinker” as a thinker focused on religion; but Catholic thinkers were, before the great wave of apostasy swept the continent, a key part of all intellectual discussion in every European country, and their Catholicism was not in any way a bar to their relevance. Therefore, when *Roman Catholicism and Political Form* attempts to justify the role of the Church in European politics, as a separate, but compatible and mediating, force on the continent, Schmitt's argument was not jarring to his readers in a way a comparable, updated claim would be today.

Schmitt begins by noting the fear that the papacy has inspired, in everyone from the Orthodox to Cromwell to Bismarck, a fear of “the incomprehensible political power of Roman Catholicism.” This is the result of its political form, a term Schmitt does not precisely define, but by which he means the visible manifestation of an organization bound by internal rules, the excessive violation of which, by implication, would destroy the form. The Church's rules, and thus its political form, are completely alien to most modern thought, and in general never match up to any secular political form. In its nature, therefore, the Church stands apart, and has always stood apart.

Schmitt notes that the idea of the Roman Church having a political form at all is not palatable to many, but he rejects their distaste. He cites Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Grand Inquisitor*, and denigrates Dostoevsky's “fundamentally anarchistic (and that always means atheistic) instinct.” “In the temporal sphere, the temptation to evil inherent in every power

is certainly unceasing. Only in God is the conflict between power and good ultimately resolved. But the desire to escape this conflict by rejecting every earthly power would lead to the worst inhumanity.”

The Church is often found allied with secular political forms, sometimes closely, sometimes tensely. Schmitt tells us that what seems to the opponents of the Church like opportunism, with the Church now on the side of reactionaries, now on the side of democrats, is not at all opportunism, but rather a sign of the Church’s pivotal position, its “political universalism.” For Schmitt, “[e]very imperialism that is more than jingoism embraces antitheses.” At the same time, the existence of antitheses blurs the political form of the Church. The key, in the modern era, is the embrace of papal infallibility (declared at the First Vatican Council, in 1870), which overarches any ambiguities with “the most precise dogmatism and a will to decision.” (We see here part of Schmitt’s core political idea of decisionism.) And the key to the claims embodied in infallibility is “the principle of representation,” which is the “antithesis to the economic-technical thinking dominant today.”

What is representation? It is reflecting in a political form what were once called “estates”—the natural groupings of a nation’s people. Schmitt argues that the political organizations which dominate a society are necessarily naturally drawn from the metaphysical views of those who live in that society. By representation, Schmitt does not mean variants on parliamentarianism, which he derided elsewhere as “endless conversation.” His is not the concern that drove, for example, the revolutionaries who built America, that the people have a voice in the halls of government. He means something deeper, the projection of inherent human tendencies into political form.

Here Schmitt pivots to directly attack “economic-technical thinking,” the basis of all post-World War I European political forms. He means, although he does not use the word, the techniques of managerialism (often combined with the emancipatory beliefs of the Enlightenment, more or less what Schmitt usually meant when he referred to “liberalism”). Economic-technical thinking aspires to universality; it is dominant over both the modern capitalist and the industrial proletarian. “The big industrialist has no other ideal than that of Lenin—an ‘electrified earth.’ They disagree essentially only on the correct method of electrification.”

Economic-technical thinking rejects representation; it offers technocracy, and through that both economic and military power.

The Church, in contrast, has neither. Instead, it has “an absolute realization of authority” gained through “its capacity to assume juridical form” and “because it has the power of representation . . . of the Person of Christ Himself: God become man in historical reality.” The Church is therefore the sole remaining representative entity, that is, an institution that organically represents a crucial tendency in all human societies, such as “the emperor, the monk, the knight, the merchant,” who earlier each had their own representations, embodied in varying political forms. Representation is the result of authority, however, not just a projection of some group, and so it cannot exist without authority. This is why none of these representations, save the Church, exist any more in any political form. “Once the wheels of modern industry began to turn, [those groups] increasingly became servants of the great machine”—and “the machine has no tradition,” upon which political form must ultimately be based to be authoritative. (The logical progression of this machine, at which Schmitt would probably express no surprise, is Paul Kingsnorth’s Machine, a totalizing political form that purports to subsume all humanity within its frame.)

Because the Church is representative, it is something deeper than the machine, which cannot represent and therefore cannot be truly authoritative, and thus it is impossible that the Church should fully align itself with “the present form of industrial capitalism,” even though it can ally, and always has allied, with other political forms. Catholicism is fundamentally opposed to economic-technical thinking, in large part because it necessarily provides for a broader range of human needs than does economic rationalism. “Economic rationalism has accustomed itself to deal only with certain needs and to acknowledge only those it can ‘satisfy.’” It does not matter if those are “for a silk blouse or poison gas or anything whatsoever.” “[A] mechanism of production serving the satisfaction of arbitrary material needs is called ‘rational’ without bringing into question what is most important—the rationality of the purpose of this supremely rational mechanism.”

However, Catholicism is also rationalism—not the narrow, blinkered rationalism of the natural sciences, but “a particular mode of thinking whose method of proof is a specific juridical logic and whose focus

of interest is the normative guidance of human life.” The thinking of Catholicism is not limited in the way that economic-technical thinking is, yet contrary to what moderns would have us believe, it is highly rational, the result of absorption of Roman law and institutions. It is “essentially juridical,” which for Schmitt is the highest compliment.

Yes, the form of Catholicism has become more rigid, more “Jesuitical,” since the sixteenth century. This is not so much a reaction to Protestantism, but more “a negative reaction to the mechanism of the age”—that is, economic-technical thinking as reified in political form, of absolute monarchy and mercantilism. The Church erected a “protective shell,” but not as a means of retaining power. “No political system can survive even a generation with only naked techniques of holding power. To the political belongs the idea, because there is no politics without authority and no authority without an ethos of belief.” That ethos offered by the Church is one that offers something “other than production and consumption.” The implication is that technical-economic managerialism is doomed by its very nature, although Schmitt does not here purport to say how or why its end will come.

Yet the Church can co-exist with technical-economic systems, while the latter still exist. For after all, they are ghosts, compared to the Church’s solidity. In every age, the Church will “align itself with [a] new order, as it has with every order,” because the Church is inherently a political form, and were the state to be unpolitical, the Church would remain political. Nonetheless, it is better for both Church and state to be political forms, and to thereby act as a type of partners, for their spheres are obviously fundamentally different—as shown by that the change to economic-technical thinking has in no way changed the essence of the Church. (This claim was true in 1923, but we all are now aware that economic-technical thinking has not only changed the essence of the Church, but bids fair to defeat it entirely, unless the odious Jorge Bergoglio is shown the door, together with his minions.)

The fundamental juridical nature of the Church implies a “foundation on the public sphere,” as opposed to liberalism’s foundation on the private sphere, which it exalts beyond all reason. The jurisprudence developed by the Church is the foundation of the political form of the Church, but it “goes further because it represents something other and more than secular jurisprudence—not only the idea of justice but also

the person of Christ—that substantiates its claim to a unique power and authority.” In some ways, Schmitt says, this is analogous to “an international court of justice,” which “represent[s] something autonomous vis-à-vis the state”—something very much in the air in 1923, and ironic, given that all subsequent such courts of justice, from Nuremberg to the International Criminal Court, are not in the least autonomous, but represent either victors’ “justice,” or are slavishly subordinate to the ideology of the jurists, today the religion of globohomo, the end-stage of economic-technical thinking.

To return to where we started, Schmitt’s criticism of Dostoevsky as anarchistic, and therefore atheistic, is perhaps the key to Schmitt’s thinking in his essay. Anarchism is the worst of all possible human political arrangements. Economic-technical thinking, whether as industrial capitalism or as Communism, preaches the fading away of the state, one in favor of a self-executing technocracy, the other in favor of the proletarian utopia. Both in fact are abdication of the need to create political forms, and lead to anarchy, which is a great evil. (It is beyond the scope of this essay, and something I will discuss in my upcoming thoughts on Schmitt’s next book, *The Concept of the Political*, but anarchy is the polar antithesis of Schmitt’s core political idea, decisionism. Thus in most of his writings Schmitt takes great pains to slag anarchism, and anarchy.) But “this formlessness may contain the potential for a new form that might also give shape to the economic-technical age. Having withstood everything, the Catholic Church need not decide these questions. Here, also, it will be the *complexio* of all that withstands. It is the inheritor.”

It did not turn out that way. If the Church could have, but ultimately did not, perform the mediating role in Europe (and perhaps the broader world) envisioned by Schmitt, what can do that now? Nothing, of course. Europe is over, and economic-technical thinking as master is dying around the globe. It is somewhat of a debility that Schmitt is so focused, in all his works, on Europe, because he did not see it was fated to die, and this gives some of his works an anachronistic feel. What will replace Europe’s once-peerless civilization? I wish I knew. I suspect, however, that if the continent is not absorbed by primitive hordes from the south, whatever replaces Europe will be a throwback. In Schmittian terms, it will offer authority based on representation, and will denigrate economic-technical thinking in all its manifestations, including

managerialism. Maybe the Church will even have something to do with it—or maybe the Orthodox Church, a much different political form, but still very much a political form, will have something to do with it.

On a less depressing note, though related, it never ceases to surprise me that Schmitt often seems to have the gift of prophecy (even if he failed to see the death of Europe). For example, this edition of *Roman Catholicism and Political Form* contains a second Schmitt essay, from 1917, titled “The Visibility of the Church.” Ulmen ties this essay to the later, main essay through the lens of how “visibility” means, for Schmitt, a “concrete manifestation in history,” and how Schmitt’s later discussion of the Church’s political form is an explication of that manifestation, a public presence of the spiritual, one that transcends a simplistic and subjective apparent rationality (and also a rejection of the “Protestant ethic” that was Max Weber’s focus, which exalted private spirituality, and was tied to economic-technical thinking). This seems true enough. But I am more interested in the passage where Schmitt touches on how among more than one pope, “there can be only one legitimate pope.”

This is obvious, to be sure. However, Schmitt’s point is that “Carried to its logical conclusion, there is even the possibility that in times of utmost confusion the Antichrist would become pope, should God allow it. But he would be no legitimate pope . . . only one with the factual semblance of a ‘legitimate pope.’” In such a case, the obligation of “the few true believers” would be to maintain “the priestly, educational, and pastoral offices in a visible, that is, juridical continuity.” Times of utmost confusion in the Church seemed very far away in 1923, but arrived four decades later, and have gotten worse and worse. I’m not saying Bergoglio is the Antichrist. In fact, I’m reasonably sure he’s not. I mean, he’s certainly evil, but if he’s the Antichrist, he’s not a very competent one, because he’s bone stupid. Still, he’s certainly playing John the Baptist to the Antichrist, and that there is more than one pope alive today, which Schmitt identified as a related matter (perhaps tied to Schmitt’s abiding interest in the *katechon*, the force Saint Paul identified as holding back the Antichrist), suggests that once again Schmitt saw, or sensed, something crucial about the future.

For students of Schmitt, I can’t say this book is essential. I read it to be complete, and for those with a particular interest in Catholic matters,

it is probably worth the effort. You'll have to make up your own mind whether it is for you. Probably just reading my thoughts is enough!