

Course Description – Political Theology

This summer course addresses an earlier neglected topic in the history of Late Antiquity and Early Christianity which has received increasing attention in the last decades: the complex history of the theological justifications of legitimacy, that is, the versions of the metaphysics of power, affecting the Empire and the Church, the secular and the sacred. The SUN course will concentrate on the first six hundred years of this long history of struggle and conflict, from Augustus to Justinian.

The problems involved in early Christian political theology first emerged in the debate between Erik Peterson and Carl Schmitt in the 1930s when the theologian and church historian Peterson rejected the possibility of a Schmittian type of political theology for orthodox Christianity (in a broad sense). The important and challenging issues involved drew attention from various quarters in the last hundred years, from Walter Benjamin and Ernst Kantorowicz to Jacob Taubes, from Giorgio Agamben to Jan Assmann.

The political character of the Church – against widespread modern common opinion – was manifest from its very beginnings. By the second half of the first century CE, the Roman authorities became aware of the threat to the legitimacy of the Empire by this new, then not legitimate religion (*religio illicita*). The political issues were explicitly addressed by Celsus, the Imperial Hellenistic critic of Christianity, as early as in the 170s. The period of persecutions also centred around the problem of loyalty to the idea of the empire, symbolized by the person of the emperor.

Besides the clashes between pagans and Christians, there were tensions within the Church, too. One of them concerned how to relate to the ecumenical polity of the era, the Roman Empire. For some Christians, the Empire was a work of Providence; for some, it was the work of Satan. The ultimate loyalty of the Christians belonged, however, to the Kingdom of God, a Biblical idea, which by definition carried huge political consequences. The clashes with the Empire eventually came to an end with Constantine, who came to be called “the Great,” and came to be venerated as a saint for his supposed contribution to the establishment of the “orthodox” dogma, due to the summon of the participants at the First Ecumenical Council at Nicaea. At the same time, in Western Christianity, the supporters of Donatus, or even Augustine himself, viewed the empire with theologically founded suspicion. By the sixth century, however, what was known as being “orthodox” in the Empire often emerged in conflict with the imperial throne (e.g. the aftermath of the Council of Chalcedon, or monotheletism, etc.). What were the reasons for this conflict, which took several forms during the first six centuries, and how did it play out in Late Antiquity? What happened before and after the “Christian turn” of the fourth century, when Christianity moved slowly from being a persecuted “sect” to the privileged religion of the Empire? How did the edict of Theodosius affect the Church, and then how did the various Christian emperors, most importantly, Justinian adopt a Christian or a Hellenistic legitimacy?

The practice of legitimizing strategies of power was not an innovation of Christianity. Political theology had already been addressed in classical Antiquity as one of the three types of theology (the other two being the mythical and the natural theology). How did Christianity impact political theology as an expression and legitimacy of political order? Conversely, how did the “Realpolitik” of the Church influence its theology concerning the secular? In what sense can one speak about the secular in this period?

This dynamic of the external events and the internal reflections of the ecclesiastical sphere would be the focus of this seven-day summer school, investigating the period from the fourth century until the advent of Justinian and the Council of Constantinople in 553.

The course will be divided into six subject areas. The first unit will explore the dynamics of the pro-imperial and anti-imperial theologies in the pre-Constantinian period. The second subject focuses on the historiography of patristic political theology as a field of study, from Erik Peterson and Robert Markus, to Jacob Taubes and Giorgio Agamben. Next, the course will explore the political character of the monastic movement from the fourth to the sixth century. The fourth subject area explores the presence of political theology in the early liturgies. Another subject area focuses on the Cappadocian Fathers and their – little-explored – role in the political changes of their times. Finally, the last unit of the course examines the role of Justinian in the development of the ideology of the Christian Roman Empire (aka Byzantium).

The faculty will start with an introduction to the Late Antique political theology of the pre-Constantinian period. This field of the research landscape of Late Antiquity has attracted less attention from this point of view; thus, it needs a careful revision of the historiography of the problem. This will be surveyed by György Geréby, primarily speaking about the motivations of the anti-imperial and pro-imperial traits of the apostolic period of the early Church.

Michael Hollerich will provide the students with his expertise on Eusebius and the reasons behind the pro-imperial theology. While Eusebius has often been branded as an opportunistic “court-theologian,” his role has been recently re-interpreted, and his genuine theological motivations are now much better appreciated.

The “ascetic revolution” sprang up in the fourth century as a bushfire. Were ascetics, anchorites or cenobites, men and women alike, able to become like a “third power” in the Empire? How and why did the desert “become a city”? Andra Jugănaru will explore the political role of the monastic movement until the seventh century.

The liturgy played a central role in the shaping of Christian identity. The liturgies expressed important political aspects that reflected political transformations (for example, assigning a certain role to the Christian Emperors). Pawel Figurski will investigate to what extent the liturgical content and the liturgical ceremonial expressed political theologies.

The Cappadocian Fathers, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa, had a strong influence on the social and political transformations of the second half of the fourth century. Mark Edwards will analyze the impact of the Cappadocian Fathers’ activities as bishops and theologians on the political context of their era.

Finally, Claudia Rapp, István Perczel and Volker Menze will explore the turning point brought about by the advent of Justinian, who redefined the relationship between the political power and the Church as the transformations of political theology in the fifth-sixth centuries. The policies of Justinian loomed large over nearly a millennium of the Byzantine world, and Ecaterina Lung will talk about the historical sources reflecting these changes in the early Medieval period.

Within this course, through lectures and individual tutorials (reflecting individual needs), the lecturers seek to provide the participants with the opportunity of gaining a more in-depth insight into the reasons and motivations for the conflicts and their resolutions in the developments of the relation between Church and secular power in Late Antiquity.