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Political Theology: Four Chapters On The Concept Of Sovereignty



Synopsis

Written in the intense political and intellectual tumult of the early years of the Weimar Republic, *Political Theology* develops the distinctive theory of sovereignty that made Carl Schmitt one of the most significant and controversial political theorists of the twentieth century. Focusing on the relationships among political leadership, the norms of the legal order, and the state of political emergency, Schmitt argues in *Political Theology* that legal order ultimately rests upon the decisions of the sovereign. According to Schmitt, only the sovereign can meet the needs of an "exceptional" time and transcend legal order so that order can then be reestablished. Convinced that the state is governed by the ever-present possibility of conflict, Schmitt theorizes that the state exists only to maintain its integrity in order to ensure order and stability. Suggesting that all concepts of modern political thought are secularized theological concepts, Schmitt concludes *Political Theology* with a critique of liberalism and its attempt to depoliticize political thought by avoiding fundamental political decisions.

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Customer Reviews

After many years, Carl Schmitt's works have finally reached the shores of the English-speaking world. Having been isolated by much of the scholarly community due to his complicity and support for Nazi Germany, it is only in recent decades that his works have garnered interest. *Political Theology*, like many of his most famous works, was written during a prolific period of his life in Weimar Germany. Indeed, this book bears the marks and concerns of the fragile political system in which he lived. Disenchanted with parliamentary democracy and the legal reasoning of his time,

Schmitt develops in this book a devastatingly sharp critique of liberal democracy and legal normativism--a critique which has become very pertinent to our current political climate (2006). In place of this, Schmitt probes into the historical and ideological framework of the state and politics so as to discover its essential characteristics, which he argues is defined and circumscribed by the exception. In short, the exception is a moment of true decision by a sovereign, by which the legal norm is created. For, as the famous opening lines of the book proclaim, "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception." Translation and Introduction Now, George Schwab has done an excellent translation of this work so as to make it clear and readable. As such, I highly recommend it to anyone who is interested in Carl Schmitt, early 20th century political theory, Weimar Germany, or recent political works by Giorgio Agamben and Chantal Mouffe. Moreover, I also recommend reading the foreword and introduction, which provide a clear and succinct overview of Schmitt's political theory. Lastly, Schmitt's works are not very accessible to a quick reading.

This book was becoming too influential to remain out of print for long, and its first sentence alone --"sovereign is he who decides on the exception"-- has likely been cited by more scholars than have ever actually read the second sentence. Still, though influenced by second-hand readings of Schmitt, most scholars manage to get quite a bit right about Schmitt's thesis, if only because it is simple, aphoristic and open-ended. Whatever its merits-- and there are many-- there is much to take exception with in Schmitt's book and in the concepts it has influenced. The notion of "the exception" requires particularly rigorous clarification because it has too often been elevated to the political-theological realm, been imbued with a fierce alterity or normless negativity, and sometime de-secularized as an equivalent of a miracle. Part of this is conflation of two senses of "exceptional": (1) "Norm vs. exception", which is a juridical distinction; and (2) the notion of "ordinary vs. extraordinary," which is more of a cultural or aesthetic distinction. The first of these-- the more banal definition-- is the one that is relevant to legal issues [OED: "The action of excepting (a person or thing, a particular case) from the scope of a proposition, rule, etc.; the state or fact of being so excepted. Something abnormal or unusual; contrasted with the rule"]. In political-theological terms, however, "The exception in jurisprudence is analogous the miracle in theology." Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters On The Concept Of Sovereignty* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 36. This is fine as an analogy, but Schmitt-- elsewhere rigorous about separating politics, aesthetics, economics, etc.-- here drags "the miracle" back into the juridical realm.

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