

The Rhetoric of Political Theology

by Vincent Lloyd

From a position of privilege, violence seems discrete, and distant. It is what soldiers do, and executioners, and low class criminals. From the perspective of those without privilege, or those who have not been enchanted by the perspective of privilege, violence comes in shades of gray. Violence comes in the harsh words (or worse) of bosses, in the hurt that we all inflict on those closest to us, in the poverty and hunger caused by inequitable economic policies, in the probes and cuts of scientific but inhumane medical practices, and in the daily humiliations experienced by those immigrants, children, women, people of color, and others who suffer domination, who cannot look others in the eye. Moreover, as Toni Morrison said in her Nobel Lecture, “Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence.” For those without the privilege to image it otherwise, shades of violence saturate the world. Violence is not the secret of politics, revealed by the cleaver and artful theorist. Politics is one among many sites of violence, a conclusion so obvious to so many that its articulation may feel pedantic.

Put another way, the rhetoric of violence is quite different than the phenomenology of violence. Phenomenologically, violence has fuzzy boundaries, seems present everywhere. Rhetorically – that is, as invoked in the discourse of the privileged and as echoed in ordinary language – violence has sharp boundaries, names a problem, and authorizes solutions. Violence names what others do that marks them as other, and violence names what we must do to protect ourselves from them. The state has a monopoly on violence to protect us from enemies at home and abroad. (Religious violence is named as the violence of other people’s religions, which our state thankfully protects us from). More precisely, the state has a monopoly on the rhetoric of

violence: to deploy that rhetoric outside of the context of the state is automatically to lose legitimacy. Protest can be oppositional, confrontational, even aggressive, but it must call itself non-violent. Further, to name injustices as violent is to call for state intervention. Churches easily embrace this rhetoric – this rhetoric of privilege – when they take the binary opposition of peace and violence as their starting point.

The state's particular ability to use violence in exceptional circumstances, when the state itself is threatened, has more to do with the rhetoric of violence than what might be called violence itself. For the normal operation of the law is deeply, inextricably entwined with violence. Aeschylus' *Eumenides* captures this as it narrates the founding of Athens' legal system. Disputes were once resolved by feuds, it tells, with each side marshaling friends for never-ending cycles of vengeance-taking on enemies that was fueled by the Furies, restless, grotesque spirits. Athena finally puts an end to these cycles of violence by instituting a court, with a jury to decide on the merits of cases. Athena's court does not end injustice; it contains injustice. Both sides are in some way right, and one right will be offended whichever side prevails. But that will be the end of it. The cycles of vengeance will cease. Athena does not expel from Athens the Furies, whose vocation it is to haunt their victims with guilt until suicide. Rather, with the help of the god Persuasion, she settles them in Athens, where their haunting violence, now contained, must forever be a part of justice in a democratic polity, inherent to the legal system.

Yet this integral connection of violence with law and democracy is often forgotten. Laws are always imperfect impositions on complicated realities, attempting to mitigate and contain injustice rather than to eliminate it – injustice that is violence, contained through violence. The peculiar notion that violence is exceptional, is deployed when the state is under attack, functions to obscure this tragic, mundane violence. That is how the rhetoric of violence conceals the

phenomenology of violence, and that is how the mundane violence of the privileged that is necessary to maintain their position of privilege is concealed. Both rhetoric and phenomenology are necessary for critical analysis. And they are both necessary for theological analysis, which is interested not only in sin but also in how our perception of sin is distorted.

What becomes worrisome is an approach located astride rhetoric and phenomenology, blurring the distinction between the two. Such approaches build on the intuition that how we imagine our worlds affects how we live in our worlds. We imagine our worlds through rhetoric – for example, rhetoric concerning the exceptional violence of the state. This affects how we live in our worlds, phenomenologically – for example, our willingness to put our lives on the line for the state because of the way its exceptional violence is portrayed. Paul Kahn, like Charles Taylor, investigates the “social imaginary,” this space of collective imagining that grows out of and affects social practice. Taylor, in *A Secular Age*, described the fundamental shift in ways of imagining time, space, and self that transformed the medieval world, when atheism was not an option, to the modern world, where secularism determines the possibilities for religion. Kahn, in *Political Theology*, investigates how violence – along with sacrifice, the sacred, freedom, faith, and sovereignty – are imagined in the contemporary United States. Indeed, Kahn writes, “Political theology today is best thought of as an effort to describe the social imaginary of the political” (26).

What is worrisome about blurring rhetoric and phenomenology by focusing on the social imaginary is that rhetoric which functions to advance the interests of the privileged is given an aura of impartiality as it sets the terms for how the social imaginary is understood. Overlooked is the possibility that the social imaginary most often instills false consciousness rather than puts into practice shared understandings of the world. Just because there is downward pressure from

the social imaginary to the individual to adopt a discrete, exceptional notion of violence does not mean that such a notion will be fully embraced. Its language may be parroted, but this does not change the underlying reality – the underlying phenomenology – that violence just does not present itself in that way. The worry is that the attempt to describe the social imaginary in fact entrenches the position of the privileged, lending their rhetoric an aura of neutrality. Indeed, the richer the account of the social imaginary, the less transparent the partisan nature of privileged rhetoric becomes, as the seemingly logical connections that weave the social imaginary and elevate it above mere rhetoric are explicated. (Taylor’s work partially escapes this criticism, as his analysis focuses on differentiating two social imaginaries and so foregrounds the contingency – and so, implicitly, the limitations and misrepresentations – of each).

Particularly troubling about Kahn’s focus on the social imaginary is just how natural he makes it sound. He writes, for example, “The leftist critique of liberalism ... avoids any claims for or about the sacred” (3), as if “the sacred” is a perfectly natural, perfectly obvious object of inquiry. Taylor at least uses categories to describe the social imaginary, such as time and the self, that are already abstract, that already have a somewhat technical sense in ordinary language. Kahn’s use of “the sacred” allows the reader to easily forget that, ostensibly, Kahn is interested in the term as part of the social imaginary rather than for the objects in the world that it references. Similarly, assertions such as “political violence has been and remains a form of sacrifice” (7) resonate so much with ordinary language that the ostensibly special use of “violence” and “sacrifice” as aspects of the social imaginary is difficult to remember. Indeed, the reader is tempted to challenge such assertions by asking for evidence, forgetting that Kahn purports to be describing how we imagine our world, not how it actually is.

Phenomenology is the method through which the social imaginary is explored, according to Kahn. But phenomenology as Kahn understands it seems to begin with ordinary language, look for what a word might refer to in the world, and then elevate the result to the status of social imaginary. Sounding much like an earlier generation of phenomenologists of religion, Kahn writes, “Theological inquiry today can only be a practice of phenomenology: to identify and describe the presence of the sacred, wherever it appears” (25). We will know the sacred, it seems, when we see it. The practice of phenomenology, for Kahn, documents this self-evidence. When phenomenology is understood this way, it has already been subordinated to rhetoric. The language used by and for the privileged determines what phenomenology does and does not discover. Indeed, the crude use of language to advance self-interest – naming as sacred the attributes of the privileged and so securing them, just as Nietzsche pointed out – is masked when it is discovered to be real, to point to actual aspects of the world: *those* sacred things, *these* violent acts, *that* freedom. In contrast, the phenomenological tradition at its best is a return to that which shows itself. It offers therapy to ease our attachment to ordinary language so that the distortions always already effected by ordinary language can be lessened. Ordinary language, including the sacred, violence, and sovereignty, may be a starting point, but is immediately put under erasure. As Morrison points out, the phenomenological resemblance between the violence of hateful words and the violence of armies challenges, rather than reaffirms, the meaning of “violence” in ordinary language.

This methodological problem raises persistent questions about Kahn’s project in *Political Theology*, questions which will be flagged as the book’s argument is rehearsed. Kahn’s central claim is that politics has two aspects, but one of them has been forgotten. We (both political theorists and the general public) think that politics concerns law and justice. But politics also

concerns sovereignty. By exploring sovereignty, we can see how politics is connected with authenticity, with sacrifice, with violence, and with the sacred. Liberalism focuses exclusively on questions of law and justice, which is why liberalism is having difficulty offering an account of violence, both by and against the state. Today, violence is a particularly pressing political issue, exposing the limitations of liberalism. Political theology, which focuses on sovereignty, offers an antidote. But where liberalism and political theology understand themselves as at odds with each other, Kahn suggests that they both describe important aspects of politics. The project of his book is to suggest ways that these two orientations towards politics can (and must) be held together.

For Kahn, the coexistence of two orientations towards politics is particularly evident in the United States. There is a mystique surrounding a shared identity as “we the people” that is irreducible to a system of laws or the claims of justice. The voice of the people, with its unquestionable authenticity, interjects itself into politics. This voice is channeled through the Supreme Court in its capacity to review laws passed by Congress, claiming its authority by reference to the nation’s founding moment, to the Constitution which is the precondition for all laws, which was the purest expression of the people as sovereign. For Carl Schmitt, the sovereign is portrayed as a single figure, a king or a dictator, an individual who can choose, who can decide. For Kahn, the sovereign is both singular and plural, the people imagined as one.

Sovereignty, as an orientation to politics, is an aspect of political theology because it has to do with the sacred, according to Kahn. He tries to establish this connection through sacrifice. People are willing to kill and to die (to sacrifice and to be sacrificed) for the sovereign. That evidence of existential commitment cannot be explained in rational or secular terms, Kahn asserts. It must be connected with the sacred. In this way, Kahn uses “theology” in a very

different sense than Schmitt. For Kahn, theology names hierophany, places where the sacred shows itself. Schmitt has no interest in the sacred itself. His interest is in traditions of intellectual reflection about God. For Schmitt, certain sorts of political ideas follow from contemporaneous ideas about God; for Kahn, certain sorts of political ideas follow from contemporaneous eruptions of the sacred. In a quite straightforward sense, Kahn is *doing* theology, himself making claims about the sacred, while Schmitt is writing *about* theology, tracking the way that religious and political ideas are connected.

Part of what makes Schmitt's work so compelling is his ability to examine traditions of theological reflection in particular places, at particular times. By showing the close connection between specific traditions of theological reflection and specific political projects, Schmitt demonstrates that political projects (such as liberalism) that purport to be universal in fact arise in specific places for specific reasons. In a sense, Kahn does just the opposite. He begins with his own, ostensibly universal, theological claims about the sacred (which he associates "phenomenologically" with sacrifice, authenticity, and freedom) and links them to politics in one very specific place and time, namely, the contemporary United States. If Schmitt historicizes, it is tempting to see Kahn as de-historicizing, portraying contemporary American politics as instantiating a universal structure – and, in doing so, implicitly endorsing American exceptionalism (note how Kahn portrays European politics as having entirely repressed the sacred; one gets the feeling that this is a defect on Kahn's view).

The connection between the sacred and violence, for Kahn, is sacrifice. These three concepts together are at the heart of sovereignty. Again, this is discerned through "phenomenological" inquiry. When we see Americans willing to fight and die for their country, we see violence, we see sacrifice, we see the sacred, and we see sovereignty. Some of us

certainly do see those things. Others do not. Indeed, religious studies scholarship on ancient sacrifice often finds that sacrifice has very little to do with violence (see especially Kathryn McClymond's *Beyond Sacred Violence*). It was often not humans or animals that were sacrificed, for example in the ancient Near East or South Asia, but foods and liquids. Sacrifice was a process of dividing up resources, setting some apart from others, rather than a drama involving knives and blood. The connection between violence and sacrifice is a modern, Christian and post-Christian trope, sometimes read back or read out onto other cultures. Indeed, it was because of the perceived violence of religion that the sacred was interiorized and privatized, made a personal free choice or personal feeling, and so pacified (see especially William Cavanaugh's *The Myth of Religious Violence*). This was a key aspect of the rise of liberalism in early modern Europe. Kahn wholeheartedly embraces this liberal perspective on religion while purporting to break free from the liberal domination of our political imagination. He embraces a "phenomenological" approach to the sacred, quaintly echoing the much contested work of Rudolph Otto and Mircea Eliade, tying it to existential commitment and authenticity. Ironically, he pairs this liberal account of "good" religion with the liberal's caricature of "bad" religion: violent, sacrifice its ultimate value, congealing society through mystification. If liberalism represses religion, and in so doing both fears and desires it, Kahn perfects rather than critiques liberalism.

Kahn does not claim to be rejecting liberalism. His intention is "to expand the horizon within which we understand the operation of the political imagination" (24). What Kahn perhaps means, more precisely, is that he intends to expand the existing conversation among liberal political theorists. Certainly political actors are aware that law and justice limn a necessary but not sufficient realm of political activity, and certainly ordinary people – those willing to

sacrifice, in Kahn's terms – also have such awareness. But why is it necessary to expand the conversation using such liberal Protestant, or post-Protestant, terms? Is Kahn condemning liberalism for its fixation on the realm of law, ignoring the sanctified realm of grace (of exception, miracle, and, perhaps, of love)? Bonnie Honig, in her *Emergency Politics*, has recently made a similar complaint against liberal theory, and similarly turned to the importance of the exception. However, Honig presents her work as “Jewish political theology.” She demonstrates how the ordinary and the extraordinary are always tied together: decision is always involved in following the law, and seemingly pure decision always occurs in a context of norms. In this way, unlike on Kahn's account, the sovereign decision is never insulated from questions of justice. But in a sense Honig, too, relies on a caricature of the “Jewish” as opposed to the “Christian” (more specifically, Protestant) – now mixing rather than separating immanent and transcendent realms.

What is so helpful about Schmitt's own work on political theology is the way that it tracked shifts in the specific discourse of theology (not in the social imaginary as a whole) and that it correlated those shifts with shifts in another specific discourse, that of political theory. Schmitt's work is filled with frustration at the lack of self-awareness of modern (liberal) political theory – frustration which is sometimes hard to distinguish from nostalgia for a theological-political era gone by. It is a disenchanting impulse which animates Schmitt's work, an aspiration to expose the specificity of liberal political vocabulary and so open space for as yet unimagined political possibilities. Such a project provides an opening for those who are disenfranchised by the language and social imaginary of the privileged and powerful. It opens space for imagining new rhetorical tools that could spotlight the plight of those who have been disenfranchised. And it opens space for exploring the variety of injustices that always accompany social life in the

fallen world, and that even more acutely accompany political life. These possibilities are shut down once political theology becomes a constructive project rather than a critical project, when it fills out the social imaginary instead of critiquing ideology, or idolatry.

These possibilities of Schmitt's text are also opened, in a different way, by Kahn's shift of focus to popular sovereignty. For Schmitt, famously, sovereign is he who decides on the exception. For Kahn, it is the American people who decide on the exception: they caused the Revolution and they formed the Constitution. As he writes, "The Constitution continues to express the revolutionary self-formation of the popular sovereign" (10). A consequence of Kahn's relocation of sovereignty is that the presidential pardon is no longer the most obvious vestige of the sovereign exception. With popular sovereignty expressed especially through the courts, it is jury nullification, according to Kahn, where we can see the sovereign deciding on the exception. In jury nullification, ordinary people see that they, together, can trump the law – for the law is ultimately theirs, its authority comes from them.

Popular sovereignty is precisely one of the two moments in recent political theology that Schmitt describes. In the first moment (the eighteenth century), the moment of transcendence, God is thought to be outside the world, starting things going and occasionally intervening with a miracle that suspends the laws of nature. Correspondingly, the political sovereign is thought to be above the people, setting the state in motion with laws and occasionally intervening by suspending those laws. In the second moment, the moment of immanence characteristic of the nineteenth century according to Schmitt, God is inside the world, spread throughout nature, inherent in the movements of things and people rather than above or beyond them. Correspondingly, the political sovereign is thought to be in the people, to be a popular sovereign,

authorizing representatives to carry out the people's business. In this model, the possibility that the sovereign could decide on the exception, could be defined by this ability, is forgotten.

In one sense, Kahn's task seems to be noting echoes of a stronger sense of sovereignty in a world that has forgotten it, of reminding an era of popular sovereignty that "popular" does not negate "sovereignty." In his examples of juries and courts, despite their differing reasons and differing votes, deliberations are bracketed: jurors or justices make decisions, they decide, in the name of the people, on the exception. But who are these people whose authority is invoked – the authority of what Kahn calls "We the People"? Are they American citizens? Or residents? Legal residents? Those who can trace their ancestry to American revolutionaries?

Put another way, it seems more productive to see invocations of the people as tools of persuasion, their authority produced rhetorically. As Jason Frank's recent book, *Constituent Moments*, argues, each time "the people" are invoked in American political history the term makes a new claim for who gets included. When Frederick Douglass felicitously invokes "we the people," African Americans count when they didn't before. If the people's sovereignty has been forgotten, why not look for it among the people and the language of their social movements rather than in institutions such as juries or courts? In social movements the rhetoric of popular sovereignty is invoked by those experiencing violence, understood phenomenologically. No longer is sovereignty a rhetoric of the privileged concealing their privilege. In contrast, locating popular sovereignty in juries and courts reinforces the social imaginary, whitewashing violence from the institutions which enforce the social imaginary – expelling rather than (rhetorically) subduing the Furies.

The apparatus of governance are always already involved in a mixture of precedent and decision on a plane removed from the people. There is no way to access the people's desires

directly, or to create a direct channel from the people to the rulers. That is the fantasy of immanence that Schmitt implicitly criticizes; more generally, that is the fantasy of liberalism. Instead, as Frank's work suggests, popular sovereignty should be understood as a history of failing better, of invoking the name of the people knowing that it will inevitably create exclusions, knowing that it will inevitably need to be invoked yet again in the future to right the present unavoidable wrongs. This is how we might hear the Occupy Wall Street protests, where demonstrators assert, "We are the 99%." There is an (obviously imperfect) attempt to claim sovereignty through the decision to name, the decision to call "us" (a particular class) "the people."

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