

## Political Theology and the Anthropocene

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### Abstract

Carl Schmitt's political theology—which refers to the translation of theological concepts into secular political and legal categories, namely sovereignty and the state of exception—is defined against a background of “metaphysical” constellations where, according to Schmitt, bourgeois individualism and the nihilism of technology have come to dominate the modern age. My argument is that our contemporary age is dominated by a new “metaphysical” constellation—the Anthropocene. This condition—to which the ecological crisis is inextricably related—demands an entirely different kind of political theology to Schmitt's sovereign-centric and anthropocentric version. As an alternative, I propose a political theology of planetary entanglement and care based on approaches from eco-political theology (Moltmann, Latour, Keller) and animal studies (Deleuze, Agamben, and Ciamatti).

Keywords: political theology, Anthropocene, Schmitt, eco-theology, animal studies

## ‘Political Theology and the Anthropocene’

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Carl Schmitt’s political theology is premised not only on the translation of theological concepts—God and the miracle—into secularized political and juridical categories, namely sovereignty and the state of exception, but also on the doctrine of original sin and the assumption of the fundamental evil of human nature (Schmitt 2005: 56; 2007: 58–60; Meier 1998). Mankind’s dangerous passions can only be controlled through the imposition of a legal-political order founded on the sovereign decision. Moreover, it is this sovereign will that determines the contours and identity of the political community, differentiating friend from enemy, inside from outside, and constructing its unity around the principle of obedience to authority. In Schmitt’s strictly hierarchical and monotheistic version of political theology, the subject is either one who authorizes and freely imposes his will, or one who obeys and sacrifices his freedom.

This idea of political subjectivity, moreover, is entirely anthropocentric. The monotheistic image of God as sovereign over the universe finds its counterpart in the secular human sovereign who governs over society and whose autonomous will exceeds and suspends the legal norms from which he derives his authority. Schmitt’s political theology is based on the idea of *transcendence*. To be sovereign, in either a political or theological sense, is to transcend the external material conditions of the world, whether these be laws, economic relations, technology, or even natural forces and systems. Indeed, for Schmitt, it is the ability to transcend the immanence of the world and to act autonomously through a decisive will, which actually confers meaning and form on the world, allowing it to be represented as a whole, as a coherent, unified concept. Schmitt’s idea of sovereignty conveys the

anthropocentric idea, derived from the Judeo-Christian tradition, of the central figure of Man who acts upon the world and dominates it. For Schmitt, the problem with theories of immanence is that they eclipse this transcendent, singular, sovereign dimension of action and existence, subsuming what is properly human into a broader set of processes, into networks of relations and forces that are beyond man's control and come to determine his existence.

### Schmitt in the Age of the Anthropocene

My challenge to Schmitt is whether this anthropocentric model of relations is still thinkable today in the time of what has come to be known as the Anthropocene, referring to the geological period in which human activity comes to affect the natural environment, in often disastrous and irreversible ways. The implications of the Anthropocene age for political theology are what will be explored in this paper. This will open up two key questions. *Firstly*, if, as Schmitt argues, each epoch is defined by a certain conceptual principle—a “metaphysical” constellation of ideas that gives meaning to the world and shapes its political ideas and institutions—then how might we grasp the political consequences of the Anthropocene as the defining principle of *our* age? What problems does it pose for political legitimacy today? In *Political Theology*, Schmitt (2005: 45) proposes a “sociology of concepts [that] transcends juridical conceptualization oriented to immediate practical interest. It aims to discover the basic, radically systematic structure and to compare this conceptual structure with the conceptually represented social structure of a certain epoch.” With the collapse of the theological world in the sixteenth century and the onset of the modern period, the unifying principle, once provided by religion, is displaced by a new “metaphysical” order defined, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, by economics, individualism, bourgeois culture, and, ultimately, by technology with its associated political form of liberalism.

I propose that the contemporary period is currently being determined by a new “metaphysical” concept of the Anthropocene that, like the earlier transformations that Schmitt surveys, will have, indeed is *already* having, dramatic political consequences, presenting the political and economic order with a new crisis of legitimacy. At the same time, the Anthropocene is radically different from the constellations that preceded it, in the sense that it imposes an absolute limit—one defined by the limits of nature—on the narrative of human progress, economic growth, technological hubris and liberal individualism that defined the previous era. The ecological catastrophe not only poses major questions for the future of the capitalist economy and the capacity of our political institutions to effectively respond to and govern this crisis, but also places in doubt the anthropocentric view of the world that has been dominant for centuries.

To some extent, the limits of anthropocentrism are foreshadowed in Schmitt’s critique of Hans Blumenberg in the final pages of *Political Theology II*. In his reading of Blumenberg’s *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, in which Blumenberg asserts the radical novelty and innovation of modernity as a sign of its legitimacy, Schmitt (2010b: 129–30) characterizes Blumenberg’s thesis as imbued with a kind of aggressive hubris borne of the idea of human and scientific progress. Implied here is a critique not only of the narrative of scientific, industrial, and technological progress, but also of the humanistic and anthropocentric image of the world central to modernity, which has displaced earlier theological representations. In Schmitt’s eyes, Blumenberg’s attempt to affirm the legitimacy of the modern age on its own terms, rather than seeing it as a secularization of theological ways of thinking, is an example of the new totalizing spirit of immanence in all its aggressivity. No doubt Schmitt is right to highlight the limits of this discourse of human and scientific progress—limits which are now being exposed by the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene signals the end of our anthropocentric modernity. However, my claim is that

Schmitt is just as beholden, in his own theologically-inflected and anti-modernist way, to an anthropocentric and anthropomorphic view of the world and of social relations.

The once dominant image of Man—whether symbolized in Schmitt’s terms as the transcendent figure of the sovereign, or in Blumenberg’s terms as the immanent spirit of human progress—is no longer appropriate. We can no longer sustain an image of ourselves, derived from humanism and, ultimately, from monotheistic religions, of an autonomous sovereign agent who acts freely upon the external natural world, bends it to his will, exploits it for his enjoyment, and yet remains ontologically separated from it. The dramatic and damaging effects of human-induced climate change are, at the same time, a reminder of our entanglement with, and dependency upon, increasingly unstable ecosystems that we share with natural and geological elements and non-human species. The contemporary age, on the contrary, is defined not by Promethean will or sovereign decisiveness but, rather, by human vulnerability and dependency—something that has been dramatically brought home to us by the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, our sense of agency, autonomy, and exceptionality has been radically disturbed by a growing awareness of our embeddedness within complex systems and networks of relations with non-human natural entities, over which we have little or no control. This extends the meaning of the subject to the question of co-existence with natural ecosystems and with non-human species. Man has now to contend with Gaia.

The Anthropocene therefore exposes the limitations of Schmitt’s model of political theology and demands a radical rethinking of the concept. There is no room for any kind of ecological awareness, let alone ecological politics, in Schmitt’s political theology, because his thinking is largely beholden to an anthropocentric and anthropomorphic model of sovereignty and politics that is now no longer credible. The Anthropocene is not only an environmental crisis, but a crisis of all existing political forms, concepts, and discourses. It relates to major questions about human finitude, our survival as a species, and our relations

with the natural world. It throws up new questions about what it means to be human and about how politics needs to be rethought in relation to our broader ecological and planetary entanglements. In this paper, I explore the possibility of a new kind of political theology—immanent and “worldly” rather than transcendent—that can respond to the ethical, political, and, indeed, anthropological challenges of the Anthropocene.

The Anthropocene was identified by Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoemer (2000), who pointed to factors such as the dramatic and unsustainable growth in human population, rapid urbanization—the fact that today, for the first time in human history, more people live in cities and in urban rather than rural areas—the growth in global cattle population, rising CO<sub>2</sub> levels in the atmosphere, the loss of tropical rainforests and coastal wetlands, and massive and unprecedented species extinction, amongst many other indicators of man’s geological influence on the planet. While a contested term, the Anthropocene refers to the geological period—usually dated to the start of the industrial revolution in the eighteenth century—in which human activity begins to have a dramatic and irreversible impact on the planet. The Anthropocene was preceded by the Holocene, a period over the past ten to twelve thousand years or so in which the Earth’s climate and ecosystems experienced relative stability. However, as it is argued, we have now entered into a new geological phase of climate and ecosystem instability as a result of the accumulated and ongoing effects of human activity. A tipping point has been reached for the survival of the life-systems of planet. Man, who once lived at the mercy of natural elements, struggling to survive and adapt himself to harsh environmental conditions, has himself now become the major geological actor, transforming the natural world around him and doing irreparable damage to it in the process. These developments have only accelerated to point where the future of life on the planet—human and non-human—is now seriously at risk. Hardly a day goes by without the reporting of some sign of impending ecological collapse, whether it is record-breaking temperatures

increasing year on year; more unstable weather patterns; melting sea ice and declining glacier density in the polar regions; rising sea levels and increased flooding of coastal areas; the pollution of rivers and oceans; damage to marine life, ecosystems, and coral reefs due to rising sea temperatures as well as to chemicals and pesticides; widespread deforestation; habitat loss; wildfires in the Arctic; declining bee and other pollinating insect numbers; soil depletion; loss of biodiversity; and what scientists refer to as the Sixth Great Extinction Event. Such are the terrifying yet utterly mundane effects of human activity on the natural environment. A report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 2021) reported an alarming increase in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in the atmosphere and the rise of global temperatures, along with decreasing Arctic sea ice and rising global sea levels, linking these unequivocally to human activity. Recent extreme weather events—such as the heatwaves and wildfires experienced in many parts of Europe in the summer of 2023—indicate that we are already living through the climate apocalypse. To limit global warming to 1.5–2 °C, in order to merely mitigate the effects of catastrophic climate change, would mean completely ending the burning of fossil fuels within the next ten years—something that seems, in the current political climate, highly unlikely.

The Anthropocene therefore poses acute political, social, technical, economic, and, indeed, philosophical and existential problems and questions for the entire human species. We now live in a condition marked, on the one hand, by human sovereignty and agency, and, on the other, by a sense of vulnerability and finitude. The Anthropocene is at once an expression of human power and human impotence as man, this most rapacious and relentless of animals, is confronted with the self-destructive consequences of his activity. Like the man of the Holocene, he once again inhabits a world he no longer controls; he is once again at the mercy of external natural forces, but these are forces of his own making. What better symbol is there of this than the COVID-19 pandemic? The viral contagion, which dramatically

disrupted human life everywhere, serves as powerful reminder of human limitation and of our vulnerability to biological organisms. That this virus apparently emerged from certain wildlife food markets in China is no accident. Like many previous epidemics and pandemics, whether Spanish influenza in 1918 or more recent outbreaks like “mad cow disease,” bird flu, and earlier versions of SARS, COVID-19 also came about as a consequence of the commercial exploitation of animals, whether through large-scale industrial farming and animal processing or the trade in wildlife. The disruption of natural ecosystems resulting from these practices leads to the inevitable crossing of species barriers, with animal to human (and in some cases human to animal) transmission of viruses. Zoonotic viruses such as COVID-19 thus overturn the very hierarchy between human and animal established by humanism and ultimately by Judeo-Christian theology. Pandemics remind us of the permeability of our bodies to pathogens and of the susceptibility of societies to viral contagions that freely cross borders—physical, geographical, political—and from which we lack any effective immune response. Human agency is now seriously threatened by viral agency. Moreover, the ease of transmission, and the inability of governments to successfully contain the virus, despite the emergency measures employed, point to the limits of political sovereignty in fulfilling its most basic function of protecting its population. That the most powerful states in the world were largely powerless against a microscopic virus symbolizes in more ways than one the limits of a politico-theological paradigm based on the preeminence of the sovereign state of exception.

The Anthropocene, and the pandemic of which it was a particular expression, present political institutions—democratic and authoritarian alike—with major challenges to their legitimacy. Thus, it becomes, from its initial, natural-scientific framework, a situation that remains to be considered in politico-theological terms. For, at present, there is simply no coherent or credible plan, short of the pronouncement of fairly modest targets for cutting CO<sub>2</sub>



emissions, such as those set in the Paris Climate Agreement of 2015, for addressing the long-term problem of human-induced climate change and the impending environmental disaster. And yet, as the scientists have been warning us for decades, the effects of this on our societies in years to come will be severe—from food and water shortages, to extreme weather events, heatwaves, crop failures, climate migration, and so on. These will no doubt result—indeed are *already* resulting—in serious antagonisms and conflicts, nationally and globally, that will have the capacity to render political systems inoperative, conjuring up a nightmarish Hobbesian vision of anarchy, scarcity and civilizational collapse: a return to the “state of nature.” Moreover, if there is to be any genuine and coordinated response to the ecological question, this will require far-reaching changes to the way we live and consume, and to the shape of our economic systems. At the very least, the previously dominant neoliberal model of a relatively unregulated form of capitalism is no longer tenable. In other words, responding in an adequate way to the Anthropocene will require radically new ways of governing the economy and protecting the global commons.

A sovereign-centric political theology such as Schmitt’s lacks the conceptual resources to properly think the consequences of the Anthropocene. Not only is it anthropocentric, as I have argued, but it is entirely concerned with the question of the legitimacy of the nation state. For Schmitt, the political community, whose identity he seeks to establish through the sovereign decision and through the friend/enemy distinction, is always the *national* community. Any vision of a global community, global governance, or even global collective action only exists in Schmitt’s political imagination as a naïve, utopian, or dangerously totalizing, vision to be opposed. Schmitt is a thinker of borders and boundaries, conceptual and political. This fetishization of boundaries recurs throughout Schmitt’s corpus. In *Political Theology*, the main concern is to establish the conceptual borders of the law—which is always *national* law—through the sovereign decision that

exceeds them and, in doing so, authorizes them. The concept of the border is further radicalized by the friend/enemy opposition formulated in *The Concept of the Political* (1932). Here the relation of enmity is intended to establish the boundaries of the national community, whose homogenous identity is differentiated from that of other potentially hostile national communities with whom one is prepared to go to war. Whilst war can become internalized, given a sufficient intensification of antagonisms between different groups and identities within the community, Schmitt's concern is to push the possibility of conflict outside the boundaries of the nation-state into the international realm. The limited, bounded horizon of nation-state Realpolitik that Schmitt seeks to preserve explains his hostility to international legal and political institutions and organizations, and indeed, to the ethical-political project of universal human rights and liberal internationalism. Not only are such devices and projects totalizing and therefore dangerous—in Schmitt's (2007: 53) eyes, they cannot be considered as proper sites of the political, precisely because they lack an outside and a stable, coherent figure of the enemy.

The same reservations about the international order are reflected in *The Nomos of the Earth*, in which Schmitt documents the breakdown of the old European telluric order of sovereign nation-states, based on land appropriation and clearly demarcated borders and boundaries, and the emergence, following the First World War, of a new international order based on bodies like the League of Nations. Moreover, Schmitt's (2006: 45) contention that all law (*nomos*) is based on the founding act of land appropriation reveals the anthropocentric and extractive relationship between man and the natural world that his conception of law and politics is ultimately premised upon.

Schmitt's political thinking is essentially tied to the bordered concept of the national community, rooted in clearly defined territory, and to a hostility toward any notion of global entanglements and responsibilities. Of course, Schmitt is right to point to the way that the

idea of international law and justice and universal human rights norms have often been used as an ideological cover for imperialist projects; that, in the words he takes from the anarchist Proudhon, “whoever invokes humanity wants to cheat” (Schmitt 2007: 54). However, what is foreclosed from Schmitt’s political theology is the possibility of an alternative global ethico-political horizon beyond that of sovereign nation states. And yet it is precisely this pluriverse of sovereign nation-states that is proving increasingly untenable in the context of problems of pandemics and ecological catastrophes, as well as energy crises, which are not confined to national borders and cannot be resolved unilaterally. These are problems that demand, in other words, unprecedented levels of global cooperation and governance. The Anthropocene thus points to the need for a new nomos of the earth. In disturbing boundaries and borders of all kinds, it demands a new vision of a global political community and new concepts of global justice, even a new kind of cosmopolitan vision.

The limits of Schmitt’s thought in contending with the Anthropocene have deeper theological roots, however. In his prison writings, *Ex Captivitate Salus*, Schmitt reflects on the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden in Genesis, as well as on the killing of Abel by Cain, the act upon which the original condition of enmity, so central to Schmitt’s political theology (Meier 1998: 46), was founded:

Whom in the world can I acknowledge as my enemy? Clearly only him who can call me into question. By recognizing him as enemy I acknowledge that he can call me into question. And who can really call me into question? Only I myself. Or my brother. The other proves to be my brother, and the brother proves to be my enemy. Adam and Eve had two sons, Cain and Abel. Thus begins the history of humankind. This is what the father of all things looks like. This is the dialectical tension that keeps world history moving, and world history has not yet ended. (Schmitt 2017: 71)

This passage is revealing because it establishes as the foundation for political theology the initial expulsion of man from the Garden of Eden and the violent relations of enmity that ensued ever since. In other words, Schmitt's political theology is precipitated by the event that symbolizes our detachment and alienation from nature. The "history of humankind" thus starts from the initial separation of man from the natural world, from the original Edenic state of oneness with nature. Moreover, it is the theological doctrine of "original sin," based on Adam and Eve's transgression at the tree of good and evil, that informs Schmitt's conception of human nature, serving as a justification for his authoritarian concept of sovereignty. Man's expulsion from paradise is, for Christian theology, the defining event of the human condition, as well as the basis for Christianity's promise of our future redemption and salvation in the coming Kingdom of God. The initial rift between man and nature lies at the heart of Christian theology, and indeed of the entire Judeo-Christian tradition. While, as I will show later, there is room within Christianity for a non-anthropocentric vision of the world, and even for a Christian political theology based around ecological awareness and environmental justice, the dominant position in this theological tradition has been an anthropocentric one in which man, divided from nature, seeks to objectify it and subordinate it to his will. The fact that Schmitt's political thinking essentially begins from man's original separation from his natural home reveals the anthropocentric orientation of his political theology.

### Decentering the Human: God, Men and Animals

The Anthropocene radically displaces the dominant centrality of human experience, making us aware of our entanglement with natural ecosystems, actors, and forces that determine us as we determine them. The dualism between man and nature, between the human and non-human, thus breaks down. Central to this is the deconstruction of the binary division between man and the animal, upon which so many of our anthropocentric political categories depend.

Giorgio Agamben (2004) highlights the workings of an anthropological machine at the heart of Western political culture, in which the identity of the human is reproduced through the inclusion/exclusion of the non-human. In other words, the anthropocentric figure of man is defined through its binary opposition to the animal, which is at the same time presupposed by it. The non-human element is not merely excluded from human culture and identity but *included within it in the form of an exclusion*—a kind of “capture” that generates a zone of exception between man and the animal. This not only authorizes the domination, brutalization and exploitation of non-human animals, but also the exclusion of certain categories of humans who are, at different times, reduced to the status of “animals.”

Moreover, just as certain human beings are “reduced” to the level of the animal, certain types of animals are “raised” to the level of human beings. The anthropomorphic treatment of animals, whereby we attribute certain human traits and characteristics to other species, is merely the other side of this “anthropological machine.” As Felice Cimatti (2020b) argues, following Agamben’s analysis, our “humanization” of certain animals, whether these be domestic pets or intelligent primates, leads to the same imposition of arbitrary exclusions, divisions, and hierarchies between animal species that we find in the human world. Once again, a certain arbitrary standard of the “human” is used to define, evaluate, and objectify animals, to identify and privilege those whom we regard as closer to us and as therefore worthy of a kind of personhood—granting them rights or legal recognition, for instance—over those deemed further away from us and to whom we deny any kind of status or protection. Therefore, a more radical strategy is to acknowledge, in the words of Cimatti (2020b: 2), that the animal *does not exist*; that, in other words, the category of the “animal,” a catch-all for a multitude of different beings, is a linguistic invention based on an arbitrary dualistic division. Rather, there are only *singular* living beings—something that would apply to both “humans” and “animals” (25).

All beings—humans and non-humans—are in different states of *becoming*. We can understand this as the multiple connections that take place between different living forces, in which their identity changes and they become something else. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari give the example of the assemblage that is formed when a wasp comes to procreate with an orchid, becoming part of the orchid’s reproductive system: the wasp enters into a *becoming-orchid*. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 294) put it: “Becoming is the movement by which the line frees itself from the point, and renders points indiscernible: the rhizome, the opposite of arborescence; break away from arborescence.” In other words, becoming refers to a threshold of intensity of connection that takes place *between* identities, such that the consistency of these identities is blurred and made indistinct. This produces what they call a “line of flight,” an immanent field of haphazard and unpredictable connections that escapes the fixed, hierarchical, “arborescent” ordering of concepts and identities. As we can see, this idea of an intensity, produced through immanent, rhizomatic connections and multiple, contingent encounters, is very different from Schmitt’s notion of the friend/enemy relation, in which intensity is understood as an increasing antagonism and *separation* between two parties, and through which their identities become more, rather than less, distinct (Schmitt 2007: 26). In other words, the ontology of becoming, something that, according to Deleuze and Guattari, all living creatures take part in, proceeds in exactly the opposite direction to Schmitt’s political theology, which is concerned with fixing concepts and identities, creating distance, defining borders and boundaries, and thereby establishing a transcendent, hierarchical order. Rather, for theorists of immanence, identities break down on a horizontal plane characterized by multiple “rhizomatic” connections that form between them. The individual subject is not a fixed, essential identity, but rather an infinite multiplicity.

Human beings can also engage in becomings-animal, as can be seen in totemic cultures. Indeed, as a way of breaking down the anthropocentric machine that fixes man and

animal to established categories of meaning and existence, thus imprisoning both, we humans might, according to Cimatti, pursue the experimental strategy of “unbecoming” our humanity and identifying with animals, or with the animal dimension of ourselves. This does not translate easily into a distinct political strategy; politics, at least in its usual understanding, and in the tradition going back to Aristotle, is an exclusively human practice, involving human subjects, identities, and institutions. Nevertheless, as Cimatti suggests, becoming-animal can be understood in an ethical and aesthetic sense: in the same way that non-human animals inhabit the environment in which they live, *using* natural elements without exploiting them or establishing proprietary relations over them, human animals can adopt a similar non-proprietary and non-dominating relationship to the natural world and, indeed, to themselves (Cimatti 2020b: 203–04). To identify with the animal dimension of ourselves is a way of overcoming the anthropological—or as one would say, *theological-anthropological*—machine that not only erects arbitrary divisions and hierarchies between man and the animal, but also alienates and divides man from himself.

Moreover, becoming-animal is associated with the formation of new kinds of groupings and collective assemblages (Cimatti 2020b: 161). However, this new formation should not be taken to imply the domination of the collective over the individual, or the absorption of the subject into a totalizing community identity. Rather, it is a new composition of singularities defined by an absence of essential identities or pre-determined categories, whether of the individual or collective.

It is therefore important to consider how the Anthropocene decenters human political experience and already evokes alternative understandings of community, subjectivity, and political engagement. Is it impossible, for instance, to imagine a form of politics no longer based around human exclusivity: new kinds of political communities and solidarities that we

form with animals, or alliances that we make with nature? Such conceptions of subjectivity and community are entirely different from the idea of a bounded national community and a unified, homogeneous *demos* central to Schmittian political theology. Given the deeply confronting, existential challenges posed by the Anthropocene, in which the very idea of human agency and autonomy are thrown into doubt, it is perhaps not surprising that this sort of right-wing identity politics, based on the illusion of sovereignty and national identity, resurges today as a paranoid reaction to the growing realization of our vulnerability as a species and our complex interdependencies on natural ecosystems. Populism is a denial of complexity. It is an expression of the desire to not be encumbered by broader systems and relationships—whether these be global, technical, or, especially, ecological. We think of the contempt displayed by populist figures like Trump and Bolsonaro toward environmental concerns and the ethical and political obligations these impose upon us. Populism is, in other words, a politics of disavowal of the Anthropocene and its de-territorializing effects.

By contrast, the recognition of complexity and ecosystem entanglement involves alternative inventions of political community, subjectivity, and action, in which solidarity with the natural world and non-human species is the guiding ethical motivation. If this is a democratic politics, it is surely very different from the democratic model based on the sovereign, unified “will of the people” that is currently producing such disastrous and rancorous demagoguery. Rather, it would evoke a very different kind of democratic horizon, one that is decentralized and pluralistic, indeed *cosmopolitan*, and which would include, or at least acknowledge the interests of, non-human actors. This could involve a fuller extension of rights to non-human species and to the natural world. Indeed, various organizations have called for legal recognition of the rights of nature alongside human rights, even drafting a “Universal Declaration for the Rights of Mother Earth.”<sup>1</sup> Or it could involve forms of activism aimed at disrupting industrial farming processes and emancipating animals from



their mistreatment, servitude, and exploitation; or protecting and defending the natural commons from commercial enclosure and extraction; or experiments in autonomous and more ecological sustainable ways of living. It will also involve complex interactions, of cooperation as well as contestation, with institutions, and policy-making at regional, national, and global levels as part of a networked model combining both formal and grassroots organizations. Of course, there are already countless examples of such practices, movements, campaigns, communities, networks, and forms of direct action taking place everywhere throughout the world.

Central to this idea is the recognition that social and political domination and violence are intimately connected with the violence and domination we inflict upon nature, and therefore that the emancipation of human beings can no longer be treated as separate from the emancipation of non-human beings and the protection of the natural world. While, of course, this language of emancipation is itself part of the Enlightenment humanist discourse—and perhaps we lack an adequate terminology for what a post-anthropological, post-humanist experience of freedom might mean—the very possibility of including non-human species and wider natural ecosystems within practices and communities of emancipation already signals a shift toward an alternative conception of politics. At the very least, emancipation, understood in its post-humanist sense, must mean something more than individual autonomy—as in the idea of negative liberty—but, rather, a sense of ethical responsibility, not only for other human beings but also for non-human species and for the natural world.

### The Political Challenge of Gaia and Eco-Political Theology

The question we are left with is whether the Anthropocene should be understood as a wholly secular, de-theologized condition to which we can only respond in the language of science, or

whether theology still might have a role to play in coming to terms with the political and ethical challenges imposed by the ecological crisis. For the most part, the Judeo-Christian tradition is an anthropocentric one (White 1967), based, as I have argued, on an original ontological separation from nature. Certainly, this finds expression within Schmitt's later considerations on the relationship between theology and politics. However, there are divergent strands within the Christian tradition that evoke an alternative, non-anthropocentric worldview and a radically different relationship between man and nature. We might think of the example of St. Francis of Assisi preaching a sermon to the birds, where we find a veneration and respect for all living things as creatures of God—a kind of “mystical animalism” (Cimatti 2020a: 25), in which non-human beings are regarded as spiritual brothers, rendered in the fact that he speaks to them, thus recognizing them as equals. This spiritual communion sought with non-human beings celebrates life in its immanence rather than transcendence. In this non-transcendent, non-anthropomorphic conception of life, God does not stand outside and above creation, but is, rather, immanent within it.

The challenges of the Anthropocene call for a new relationship between science, politics, and theology. This is apparently what Bruno Latour had in mind when he calls for a new political theology of Gaia. Writing in the context of the Anthropocene and the new climatic regime, Latour points to the deeply religious structure of secular modernity as a way of understanding our apparent indifference—or at least our incapacity to act—in the face of the impending ecological emergency with its connotations of the “end of times.” This is because, he argues, we moderns live *as though the Apocalypse has already occurred*. In a sense, modernity has inherited from religion the apocalyptic narrative; but the peculiar attitude of many moderns—including climate sceptics and those who appear unperturbed by the warnings of ecological collapse<sup>2</sup>—is the idea that they inhabit a post-apocalyptic time at the end of history, where nothing further can happen to them (Latour 2017: 195–96).

One detects this deeply nihilistic way of thinking in the contemporary politics of right-wing nationalist populism, which is closely associated with climate change denial and the abdication of ethical responsibilities beyond national borders (Jylhä and Hellmer 2020; Krange, Kaltenborn, and Haltman 2021). In the populist fantasy, people can carry on blissfully with their current way of life, consuming without limit while the world burns around them. Scientific knowledge and discourse about climate change cannot, on its own, dislodge this other-worldly belief system. Theology has a role to play here. So, for Latour, the only way this secularized religiosity can be countered is through another kind of (political) theology embodied in the figure of Gaia, the earth-goddess derived from Greek mythology, deployed by James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis (2000; 2009) as a way of understanding Earth as a complex, self-regulating system of living organisms and geological forces. Yet, Gaia is just as indifferent to our survival as a human species as many of us are to it; human-induced climate change and environmental damage simply means that Gaia will adjust to these changes while making the planet unlivable for us humans. This is why, for Latour, Gaia is a salutary figure of the real Apocalypse. It gives us a more worldly, earth-bound experience of the contemporary world, one that is *pre-* rather than post-Apocalyptic, and which therefore forces us to reflect on and take seriously the climate emergency:

Gaia is the signal telling us to come back to Earth. If one wanted to sum up its effect, one could say that, by requiring the Moderns to start taking the present seriously at last, Gaia offers the only way to make them tremble once again with uncertainty about what they are, as well as about the epoch in which they live and the ground on which they stand. (Latour 2017: 219)

As a way of facing up to the challenge of Gaia, Latour calls for a politicization of the climate debate. The problem, as he sees it, is that the appeal to a pure, pristine idea of “nature,” and to

the scientific consensus around climate change, has led in the past to a kind of de-politicization of environmental questions. One appeals to science as the final, absolute arbiter to settle controversies over climate change. However, as Latour also recognizes, this situation has now changed: in the current era of populist politics and “post-truth” discourse, in which the legitimacy of established sources of knowledge and expertise are dismissed by many, especially populist leaders, as “fake news,” it is no longer sufficient or effective to simply point to the scientific consensus (see Newman 2019). Politics once again enters the fray, as we engage in new and intense political disputes over existential questions.

Does this signify, after all, a return to Schmitt and his idea of politics as constituted by the existential opposition between friend and enemy? While I would agree with Latour that the Anthropocene question demands urgent politicization—and indeed a new kind of political theology—I have at the same time argued that Schmitt’s model, based on sovereign exceptionalism, enmity, and nation-state geopolitics, is simply not up to the task at hand. While Latour cautions about taking Schmitt in appropriate doses, he nevertheless takes some value from Schmitt’s skepticism about globalization, as expressed in *Nomos of the Earth*, about the image of the Globe as a new spatio-temporal ordering of the international system: “It is because Schmitt doesn’t give a single thought to the Globe that *The Nomos of the Earth* can be used to conceptualize the successor to the political, scientific, and theological notion of ‘nature’” (Latour 2017: 230).

No doubt it is important to be critical about the discourse of globalization—a discourse that has, in any case, largely fallen out of favor in recent times. Indeed, liberal globalization, in its close association with global capitalism, enshrined in free trade agreements and the legal regulation of international commerce, has led to the over-exploitation of natural resources and an acceleration of climate change. However, surely the

solution to this problem is not a return to an old order of international politics defined by nation-state sovereignty and geopolitical competition (*Grossraum*), if such a return were even possible. This would be to affirm the populist fantasy of a self-sufficient, autonomous nation-state, aggressively pursuing its own national interests, extracting and exploiting its own natural resources without limit, and abandoning all responsibilities beyond its own borders. Therefore, to respond to the challenge of Gaia and the political demands of the Anthropocene, we need a different kind of political theology based on an alternative global image, a new nomos of the earth centered around a genuinely cosmopolitan vision of global justice and solidarity.

So while I acknowledge the diagnostic value of Schmitt's critique of globalization, he offers us no viable alternative. There is nothing redemptive in his reactionary geopolitical worldview and it offers no answers to our current predicament. It is here that I would agree with Catherine Keller (2018) in her critique of Schmitt: while Schmitt's notion of political theology is important for understanding global conflict, violence, racism, and neoliberal economic domination, its sovereign exceptionalism and anthropocentrism make it unsuitable as a model for a politics that recognizes planetary and ecological entanglements. In opposition to this, Keller proposes an idea of politics based on assemblages and interconnections that cut across lines of difference and antagonism. Indeed, Keller's aim—and my aim—is to blur, soften, and disrupt the hard lines between friend and enemy, and between man and nature, established on the basis of sovereign exceptionalism, and which seem only to be intensifying today.

I have suggested the need for a different way of thinking about political subjectivity, community, and engagement based on the recognition of our involvement with natural ecosystems and networks and on the affinities and solidarities that we form with non-human

life-forms. In developing this alternative account of politics, we can draw some insights from Keller's ecopolitical theology. Her thinking is influenced by apophatic or negative theology, a form of Christian mystical theology in which God is essentially unknowable and unnameable, a mystery beyond signification. In engaging with this tradition, through theologians such as Nicholas of Cusa and Gregory of Nyssa, and by bringing it into dialogue with the process thought of Deleuze and Alfred North Whitehead, Keller develops a theological way of approaching the experience of entanglement, which she associates with nonknowing and nonseparability. The God envisioned here is a kind of pantheistic God, God as an infinite figure of becoming and immanence, of material processes and relations. With Whitehead, we can think of God as immanent within the world and the world as immanent within God. At the same time, God transcends the world, and the world transcends God. In this conception of God as a creative process, the very distinction between transcendence and immanence is dissolved (Keller 2015: 190).

This sort of process thinking rejects the idea of *creatio ex nihilo*. Seeing the world in terms of an immanent set of processes and relations of complexity means that we cannot hold onto the idea of God as an "absolute controller" who creates something out of nothing (Cobb and Griffin 1979: 65); just as, politically speaking, we can no longer reduce meaning and action to the autonomous and exceptional sovereign decision that, on Schmitt's account, also comes out of nowhere. Instead, process theology embraces the idea of *complexity* and *interrelatedness*. Indeed, the more complexity and novelty there is in the world, the more enjoyment is stimulated. This is why process theology not only supports a more pluralistic experience of religion, but also leads to a recognition of environmental interdependency. It also implies an attitude of respect, reverence, and kinship with other creatures—one that is based, furthermore, on *enjoyment*, or what might be called enchantment, and it is this that impels us to treat non-human beings with equal ethical consideration. As process theologians

John Cobb and David Griffin (1979: 77) say: “Accordingly, if all actualities, not simply human ones, are constituted by the enjoyment of experience, and hence are to some degree ends in themselves, then we should, to the appropriate degree, treat them as ends and not merely as means to our ends.”

We find this idea also reflected in the ecological thinking of post-war German Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann, whose eschatological Christianity—which was directed explicitly against Schmitt’s sovereign-centric political theology (Moltmann 1999)—also embraced an idea of the rights of nature and ecological liberation (along with other liberation and social justice struggles). Indeed, Moltmann develops an ecological theology of creation that rejects an anthropocentric view of the world for a *theocentric* one: the earth is not man’s property but God’s—it is the house of God—and while humans have stewardship of the earth, they do not have the sovereign right to exploit it irresponsibly and without regard to all its other non-human inhabitants, whose equal rights and status must also be recognized (Moltmann 1985). Moreover, this non-anthropocentric way of thinking also decenters the idea of a sovereign anthropomorphic and transcendent God. Rather, God should be seen as immanent within nature, as living within his own house and as part of his own creation. The emphasis of Moltmann’s eco-theology is on our contingency and our *communion* with the earth and with natural ecosystems, upon which our survival depends, to which we therefore have obligations, and whose rights we must therefore respect. It is precisely the theological idea of the covenant with God that brings together the human and natural worlds as areas of common ethical concern, thus allowing this interlinking of different orders of rights. By adding a spiritual or sacred dimension to the language of politics, we can construct alliances and solidarities between man and nature, between human and non-human.

The experience of affective attachment to the natural world can elicit a greater sense of responsibility toward the environment and can act as a supplement to climate science. The effects of the recognition of natural planetary entanglement are ambiguous, often producing as much uncertainty as certainty and, thus, at times giving impetus to climate change denial. How often do climate sceptics seize on the slightest shred of uncertainty within scientific discourse to affirm the view that human-induced climate change is not real or has been exaggerated? Despite the scientific consensus around climate change, facts and statistics alone will not convince everyone. There is thus a role for theology to play in the politics of the Anthropocene, not so much in increasing our stock of scientific knowledge about the natural world but, rather, in showing us how we might enjoy it, how we might become more aware, on an experiential, somatic level, of our entanglement with nature; how we might revel in the feeling of interconnectedness with natural ecosystems and non-human beings. As Keller (2015: 269) puts it: “An apophatically canny ecotheology may, in other words, prove to be a useful ally of an activist cosmopolitics informed by environmental science. For it invites us to embrace, even to feel, the adaptive resilience of the planetary web of a living interconnectivity.”

Science is invaluable, of course, in making us aware of the damage we are inflicting on the natural environment and in proposing technical and policy measures that can mitigate its effects. But an eco-theology—or eco-theologies—can help us identify with and affirm the life forces and ecosystems that remain, thus motivating us to preserve them.

Conclusion



In this paper, I have highlighted the limitations of Schmitt’s political theology in facing up to the challenges of human-induced climate change and the Anthropocene condition. I have suggested that the Anthropocene must be regarded as an entirely new “metaphysical” constellation that throws all existing political systems and institutions into crisis, raising pressing politico-theological questions—questions that Schmitt’s sovereign-centric and anthropocentric model lacks the conceptual resources to answer. Rather, a new political theology—one based on ecological entanglements, planetary care, and the possibility of new political solidarities with the natural and nonhuman worlds—is called for. In a world faced with catastrophic climate change—fueled by the politics of reactionary populism and its underlying nihilism—we must be able to tap the rich political and conceptual resources of theology in order to cultivate a new attitude of care for, and enjoyment of, the natural ecosystems with whose fate we are inevitably entangled.

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<sup>1</sup> This was the GARN declaration drawn up on April 22, 2010 in Cochabamba Bolivia. See <https://www.garn.org/universal-declaration/>.

<sup>2</sup> This peculiar attitude was nicely satirized in the recent movie *Don't Look Up*, in which the imminent collision of a comet with the Earth is largely met with a shrug of the shoulders.