

# Critical Dialogue

## **Divine Democracy: Political Theology after Carl**

**Schmitt.** By Miguel Vatter. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. 308p. \$110.00 cloth, \$38.95 paper. doi:10.1017/S1537592723000889

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From Christian dominionists in the United States to far-right Jewish nationalists in Israel to Hindu supremacists in India, theocratic movements are on the rise. For liberal democrats the stakes seem clear: on one side, reason, secularism, and Enlightenment; on the other, a new dark age. Yet consider a discomfiting thought: What if this framing gets the danger all wrong? What if the very democratic systems to which theocracies are counterposed were never actually secular? What if theology has always been constitutive, in some form, of political order—if politics, no matter how modern, must rely, explicitly or covertly, on elements of religion?

That is the provocative and timely question posed by Miguel Vatter in this landmark book. For Vatter, the question theorists should ask today is not how the west might finally escape from its entanglement with political theology, but rather *how to find the right one*: a “democratic political theology” that can realize the values of equality and nondomination without slipping into the fetters of market governmentality or charismatic authoritarianism. To help answer it, Vatter traces this quest from its origins in Carl Schmitt to the present day, offering a dazzling and learned retelling of postwar European political thought.

Each chapter of *Divine Democracy* covers an astounding terrain of texts, authors, and ideas, from ancient Jewish, Christian, Hellenistic, and Roman thought to medieval constitutionalism, early modern and Enlightenment philosophy, and contemporary democratic theory. Just as remarkably, this breadth does not come at the expense of either historical sensitivity or engagement with secondary scholarship.

Consider Vatter’s reading of Schmitt. Vatter (1) masterfully shows how Schmitt developed his ideas, in reaction to Hans Kelsen’s discussions of law, representation, state “personification,” and political-theological analogies (pp. 25–35); (2) transports us back to Hobbes and early modern debates about church–state authority (pp. 35–48); (3) moves us horizontally through Schmitt’s

engagement with Eric Peterson and consequent intellectual evolution (pp. 53–57); and (4) sends us forward to consider the normative implications of Schmitt’s ideas on representation for debates in contemporary democratic theory (64–65).

The same wonderful qualities—richness, nuance and attention to both historical detail and contemporary relevance—characterize the chapters on Voegelin, Maritain, Kantorowicz, and Habermas. Vatter ingeniously links Voegelin, reputed for his conservatism, to post-Marxist Ernesto Laclau’s theory of populism (pp. 91–93), whereas Maritain’s analysis of natural law and democracy is joined to Alain Badiou’s “radical universalism” (pp. 122–32). With Kantorowicz, we find a fascinating exposition on Dante (pp. 172–80), as well as the concept of “reverse political theology”: a medieval “theologization of the law as a way to emancipate forever the modern state from the Church” (pp. 141–42, 160). And with Habermas, we discover—with a supporting cast including Hegel, Kant, Cohen, Bloch, Jaspers, Löwith, Derrida, and others—that there is actually a kind of messianic “condition of possibility” to democratic legitimation (pp. 202–3).

*Divine Democracy* does raise a few questions—not so much criticisms as invitations for further discussion. To begin with, the book’s very scope poses a conceptual dilemma. Vatter’s framing implies that it will trace how the specifically *Schmittian* formulation of political theology is taken up in postwar political thought. In fact, political theology is used in the book in many ways, only some of which fit with Schmitt’s usage (for the better). Schmitt’s stated aim is methodological: we can gain insights into fundamental political issues, like legitimacy, by considering whether their formulation derives from a theological analogue. Vatter impressively demonstrates how each thinker was himself responding to, or building on, Schmitt’s thought. Yet the risk remains of political theology coming to refer to almost *any* relation between politics and religion—of the concept becoming so “stretched” as to lose its distinctive explanatory power (Giovanni Sartori, “Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics,” *American Political Science Review*, 64(4), 1970).

For instance, is Voegelin’s “political religion” most accurately understood as a “theologico-political treatment” of totalitarianism (p. 68)? Or, following Voegelin himself,

is it a scientific analysis of how politics can take on the social-psychological elements and pathologies of collective religiosity? Voegelin, tellingly, does not refer to Schmitt directly in the *New Science of Politics*, and although Vatter does note some possible references (p. 73n14), and makes an intriguing case for their intellectual engagement on “representation,” this seems insufficient to conclude that Voegelin sought to “provide a groundwork for a new Christian political theology” (p. 74). Indeed, when Voegelin does refer to political theology, it is defined not in Schmitt’s sense, but in terms of the classical idea that rulership represents the cosmic order, as, for example, in ancient China, Egypt, and Babylonia.

Vatter’s response is to define Voegelin as a political theologian insofar as he believed that human order should stand for “something beyond itself...a transcendent reality” (1952, p. 54). Leo Strauss (and Plato) thus become political theologians in a similar vein (pp. 83–84), as do, for different reasons, Maritain and Habermas. To defend these characterizations, Vatter insists, fairly, that one should not reduce “the discourse of political theology to Carl Schmitt” (pp. 102, 191n9). Still, are we really best off reading these thinkers as political theologians—often not only against the grain but also their self-definition? Voegelin and Strauss self-consciously placed themselves in the tradition of political philosophy, not political theology; Maritain’s political theology is *actually* theological, with sovereignty rightly belonging to God alone (p. 110); and Habermas, of course, explicitly rejects any religious legitimation for democracy. If all of them indeed belong under the rubric of political theology, what does the concept help us explain?

One answer, following Schmitt, is what we might call political theology’s *dependence thesis*: that elements of political life, no matter how secular they might appear, always remain in some sense dependent on a theological analogue. Versions of this thesis appear throughout *Divine Democracy*, as for example in Vatter’s reading of Maritain. Maritain’s Christian political theology, he argues, provided “the basis for the internal connection between democracy and universal human rights,” a connection that found “expression,” most prominently, in a “neoliberal global legal order” (p. 98). Consequently, Vatter concludes, “The legitimacy of universal human rights is *dependent* on a politico-theological approach to these rights” (pp. 99–100; emphasis added).

Yet what, exactly, is the nature of this dependence? Vatter makes a compelling case for both Maritain’s engagement with Schmitt and the role played by his actual theological commitments in shaping his human rights philosophy. But to demonstrate that an idea *originates* in theology is not enough to prove its ongoing *dependence* on it. More needs to be shown to prove the stronger claim: that the idea remains structurally, psychologically, or normatively bound, in some sense, to its theological

origins. One suggestion Vatter proposes is that the “human” in human rights “depends on some basic level on the shared belief in the intrinsic value of human life or the sacredness of life itself” (p. 101). This might be the case as an historical thesis. But as Kant, Habermas, and contemporary moral realists might respond, even if human dignity began life in Judaism and Christianity, somewhere along the way it detached itself from these theological origins, acquiring a normative autonomy independent of religion. Today one does not need theology to believe that human life has intrinsic value.

Vatter is clear from the start that he does not intend to offer his own answer to the book’s defining question: “Does liberal democracy require a politico-theological foundation?” (p. 4). Yet in concluding, he strongly hints that his own answer is yes; and, provocatively, that this foundation should ideally not be monotheistic but pantheistic or pagan. Vatter arrives here by invoking another iteration of the dependence thesis, this time in Agamben. For Agamben, “modern democratic legitimacy still relies on the mechanisms of acclamation and glorification of the leader as Head of a mystical Body... a model of the populist acclamation of a leader who incarnates the substantive identity of a people” (p. 246). What follows is a diagnosis of democratic pathology. Although liberalism and totalitarianism might appear diametrically opposed, this is only a matter of “appearance”: both are traceable to “Christian democratic political theology” (p. 246). Consequently, we should not be surprised that liberal democracies provide a fertile ground for populist, authoritarian, or fascist figures. Such charismatic models of leadership draw on deep psychological roots—implanted by Christianity, buried in our consciousness, and transplanted into our secular age (p. 247).

One might respond to this claim empirically: What about the rise of charismatic leaders and mass movements in places that have little history of Christianity, like China? Vatter, however, chooses to address Agamben’s worry by proposing an alternative political theology. As a political metaphor, monotheism implies the concentration of power: a sovereign who, by analogy to an omnipotent deity, claims to speak for the people. For Vatter, a political theology of *multiple* gods actually underlies republican government. It structures the idea, associated most prominently with American democracy, of the “division of powers” (pp. 255–56). Yet for Vatter the most important implication of such a pagan political theology is not institutional but interpersonal. By “abolishing all claims to absoluteness” of power (254), it allows citizens to achieve a “state of non-domination”: “everyone can look into everyone’s eyes and not have to avert their gaze” (p. 256).

This is indeed an attractive portrait of free and equal citizenship. But in concluding, I do want to raise a few concerns. First, Vatter’s proposed replacement of

Christian political theology with a pagan one assumes a version of the dependence thesis. Yet the claim that human psychology must conceptualize politics in religious-cosmological terms is an empirical one. And if it is not true, or inevitably true, why do we need a new polytheism? Can't we just talk about political order plainly, without theological analogies? Second, although checks and balances are important, there are other ways to restrain the people's sovereign power. Tocqueville, famously, claimed that "the people reign over the American political world as does God over the universe" (*Democracy in America*, 2002, p. 55). Yet he also argued that in practice, their politico-theological voluntarism was checked by shared ethical practices based on Christianity and manifest in civil society.

Finally, placing politics on pagan foundations may have worrying moral consequences. Reducing political institutions to rival powers is one thing. Vatter implies, however, that this should be our *ethical* orientation toward one another as well. And in looking one another in the eye, a lot depends on what we see. Do we perceive merely a rival equal in power—an incarnation of one of Weber's "warring gods" of disenchanted modernity? Or do we see instead an Other—a human being of incomparable moral worth, the subject of an indeclinable obligation, an invitation to sacrifice, hospitality, and kindness? Schmitt may be right that there is something irreducibly religious about the human psyche. But perhaps it can be channeled differently—not into polytheism's bruising and agonistic arena, but into a new site for solidarity and ethical life.

These are questions, not conclusions. And they are dwarfed by Vatter's remarkable achievements. *Divine Democracy* offers a comprehensive education in political theology, not only for students new to the subject but also for those who have closely followed its associated questions and debates. It should become a mainstay in graduate courses and will immediately provide a critical resource for anyone interested in postwar political theology or, indeed, the broader relationship between religion and democratic theory. Anyone who wants to answer the questions raised here would be well advised to begin with Vatter's important, groundbreaking, and indispensable book.

**Response to Charles H. T. Lesch's Review of *Divine Democracy: Political Theology after Carl Schmitt***

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— Miguel Vatter 

I thank Charles Lesch for his exceedingly generous reading of my book and for his incisive questions. As I see it, we both start from a "methodological" approach to the discourse of political theology, whereby the analogies between theological and political concepts are the crucial

factor. We are both interested in applying this approach to understand some of the dilemmas faced by liberal democracy. The difference between us is that for Lesch, as he passionately argues in his book, the "theological" is crucial for liberal democracy because it harbors a fundamental moral or ethical concern for the otherness of the Other (be this God or another human person). I tried to understand the use of this analogy more in line with what I believe was Schmitt's intention behind coining the term of political theology, namely, as a genealogical account of jurisprudence in the West as it developed from canon law onward. As proposed by Harold Berman, canon law was the instrument that the Christian Church adopted to proclaim its "liberty" from the dependence and dominance of the Holy Roman Emperor. From this point of view, Christian political theology is a discourse intended to legitimize the rule of law (embodied by the church) against the rule of persons (represented by the empire). I identify this impetus at work in thinkers like Voegelin and Maritain, for whom the new empires were the fascist and totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century.

The system of government through rational, self-referential rules, first developed for the sake of the universal Christian Church, was subsequently adopted and adapted by various early modern European national monarchies in their effort to build states of their own that would also be independent from imperial dominance, as argued by Ernst Kantorowicz. The notions of sovereignty and of the state of exception as Schmitt understands them are juridical notions that belong to these efforts to "rationalize" the state, to generate a legal "reason" of state, not its "unreason," in part by using analogies to the structure of divine power and government. I see this logic still at work in Habermas's reconstruction of the idea of public reason as the ultimate ground of liberal democratic legitimacy. My gamble is that one can avoid the risk of political theology "coming to refer to almost *any* relation between politics and religion" if one sticks to its juridical meaning.

Lesch's second question is whether concepts like human rights and human dignity are still "dependent" on their theological sources for their normative force. Here I would distinguish between what I believe and what I think someone like Maritain believed. For Maritain the answer is certainly affirmative, and I tried to explain not only his reasons for believing this, but also why the implementation of human rights discourse in the neoliberal world order is, paradoxically, reliant on this theological reconstruction of human rights. This does not mean I share this view. From my perspective, the question is better posed this way: What does a genealogical approach to political and legal concepts entail about their normative validity? I think this question is far from being answered today, and the discourse of political theology should be at the heart of this ongoing debate.

Lastly, I am grateful to Lesch for pointing out that I am not advocating a Christian political theology as much as studying it, and that my preferred alternative to such a political theology is actually the modern republican conception of civil religion, which attempts a complex reconciliation between a pagan and philosophical approach to politics and the approach offered by revealed monotheisms. I see this civil religion at play in Rousseau and Kant, whereas Lesch, in his innovative and careful readings of these authors, roots their political thought in Christian political theology. I hope we shall have further occasion to debate this difference in interpretation because of its importance for the self-understanding of liberal democracy.

**Solidarity in a Secular Age: From Political Theology to Jewish Philosophy.** By Charles H.T. Lesch. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. 280p. \$74.00 cloth.  
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As Charles Lesch employs the concept of solidarity in his provocative book, it is synonymous with “fraternity” and with what Ronald Dworkin called “integrity”: the third, more obscure, and ultimately religious principle that turns the modern revolutionary promise of “liberty” and “equality” into a reality for all. Without solidarity, liberal democracies cannot get their citizens to sacrifice themselves for country, stand up against injustice, and help those in need because the motivation for these sorts of actions does not come “by liberal ideals or institutions, but by the untamed, nonrational parts of our psyche” that are associated with religion (p. 11). According to Lesch, it was Carl Schmitt who first identified a fatal flaw in liberal democracy: it relies on religious sources of solidarity that it simultaneously needs to disavow in the name of secularism and religious neutrality. The only way to resolve this problem, which Lesch calls “Schmitt’s challenge,” is for liberal democracy to understand itself as a “political theology.” That is, liberal democracy needs to secularize and rationalize political concepts drawn from religion to generate “liberal solidarity,” a combination of the willingness to transcend self-interestedness while adhering to the absolute values of individual freedom and human dignity. In the first part of the book, Lesch reconstructs the “political theology” of Rousseau, Kant, and Habermas as forms of “solidarity through secularization” of the divine. However, for Lesch these liberal political theologies remain too rational; they fail to grasp that “liberal solidarity cannot subsist on reason alone” (p. 12). For this reason, in the second part, Lesch turns to the Jewish thought of Levinas and Buber, who better channel the “nonrational psyche... into forms of solidarity supportive of liberalism”

and develop “solidarity through imitation” of the divine (p. 12).

Through a series of sophisticated interpretations of Rousseau, Kant, Habermas, Levinas, Buber and George Eliot, Lesch makes a strong argument for the hypothesis that these thinkers seek to reduce dependence among citizens by appealing to conceptions of solidarity that leverage the analogy between theological and political concepts. For reasons of space, I focus on the contraposition between Rousseau’s and Kant’s political theologies and the religious ethics of Levinas and Buber. In the case of Rousseau, the idea of the “general will” is meant to resolve the paradox that only by giving their will entirely over to the sovereign or political body is each citizen guaranteed their freedom “against all personal dependence” (Rousseau, cited on p. 31). Following other commentators, Lesch argues that the general will is a political and secularized transposition of Malebranche’s occasionalism, a theory of relationship between divine and human agency according to which “every time a person acts, his action is only effective because God wills it” (p. 43). God always wills what is good, just like Rousseau’s sovereign will is always right. But as particular individuals endowed with the capacity for arbitrary choice, we may not always see how these divine or political general laws are really in our best interest and may thus choose to do otherwise in the belief that we would be better off. That is why, as Rousseau famously put it, we have to be “forced to be free.”

Lesch finds Rousseau’s expression problematic because it turns the analogy between divine and sovereign will into a political myth, as if the sovereign will, which is supposed to emerge out of a social contract between individuals, instead were “a metaphysical collective agent” (p. 53) whose existence is independent of the consent of individuals and in the end generates solidarity in ways that contradicts the liberal belief in individual liberty. Now, the problem of how to render compatible the general will with the particular choices of citizens can also be understood in terms of the tension between state and civil society. The politico-theological analogy that accounts for, and perhaps also resolves, this tension is based on analogies with the Trinitarian structure of God, in particular with the idea of a “divine economy” based on the government of Christ rather than the rule of God. This is how Giorgio Agamben, for instance, mobilizes Malebranche’s occasionalism to account for the “economic” coordination between individual choices and general laws in modern societies. Lesch never mentions the Trinity in his account of Rousseau’s or Malebranche’s political theology, and I would like to ask him why.

For Lesch, Kant veers into political theology with his idea of spontaneity, which is analogous to “God’s spontaneity” because both require the “miraculous” interruption of natural laws (p. 66). Unlike most commentators, including Habermas, who see the kernel of Kant’s

political thought in his system of rights, Lesch thinks that the purportedly antinomian structure of human spontaneity takes Kant's politics beyond the juridical and into the sphere of religious ethics. I have doubts that this is the case, because after all the moral law is a fact of reason for Kant; however, I do agree with Lesch that Kant did not believe that a society in which my freedom is the limit of your freedom, and vice versa, is sufficient to guarantee the realization of our moral capacity. Lesch argues that only in *Religion within the boundaries of mere reason* and its conceptions of radical evil and of a rational ethical community does one near "the heart of Kant's long-anticipated political theory" (p. 71). The ideal of ethical community corresponds to the messianic "kingdom of God on earth" and complements a political society where citizens are bound by "juridical" laws by setting up a "public moral culture" (p. 76). Lesch understands Kant's ethical community as the opposite of Rousseau's civil religion: whereas the latter justifies the political realization of ethical being by forcing people to be free, via the earthly god of the sovereign, Kant wants a religious ethics to perfect politics and the human sovereign to be replaced by the intervention of "the deity itself" (p. 78). Without "the management of the moral ruler of the world" (p. 79), the good society remains unattainable. Lesch is unconvinced by Kant's turn toward the messianic, but it is unclear why. I missed in this context a discussion of Kant's approach to Jesus's teachings, no longer taken as the foundation of the "visible" church but in light of a more enlightened, constitutional, and republican ideal of an "invisible" church.

In the second part of the book, Lesch argues that the ideal of Kant's religious ethics is best realized by Levinas's proposal that we should approach others "as we would the divine being" (p. 114). According to Lesch, Maimonides's negative theology stands behind Levinas's ethics: just like God is "beyond being" and beyond categorization, so too each individual should be treated as if they were radically other (p. 129). Maimonides assumes the unknowability of God's essence but argues that human imitation is possible in relation to God's actional attributes; that is, to God's providential or governmental manifestation in history. Yet Lesch does not speak about divine providence or government in this context (p. 129, esp. n85). If Lesch is right, and Levinas does borrow from Maimonides the belief that "how human beings should relate to God provides a model for how we should relate to other human beings" (p. 130), then doesn't this possibility of imitation make sense only if the Godhead is structured legally and politically from the start; for example, if divine revelation takes the form of law or even of a constitution, as in Deuteronomy? Additionally, if Levinas is right and our metaphysical desire to know God (what is truly true and really real) somehow translates directly into the motivation "to improve the well-being of my fellow man" (p. 131), it is unclear how this avoids

Rousseau's problem: given that liberal and democratic governments exist for the sake of improving this well-being, wouldn't the Levinasian program encourage seeing government as an earthly god?

This question also seems to guide Lesch's brilliant discussion of Buber's conception of "theopolitics," which calls for "human beings to mutually subject themselves to God's kingship" (p. 149) as a direct response to Schmitt's "political theology." For Buber, the biblical idea of God's kingdom contains a political axiom: "when all people are mutually dependent on divine rule, none are dependent on merely human rule" (p. 150). However, if liberal democracy and theopolitics share the ideal of organizing political society to diminish relations of dependence and domination between persons, they would seem to be at odds on the means to achieve this. For Buber, nondependence can only be achieved if God's rule "potentially interpenetrates all" spheres of life (p. 152). This would seem to go directly counter to the spirit of liberalism, which holds onto a radical separation of private and public, church and state. In what sense is theopolitics still a form of liberal politics?

I end my discussion by returning to the idea of solidarity. If I understand the book correctly, the ultimate meaning of solidarity or fraternity corresponds to the biblical virtue of *chesed*, or charity—which Lesch translates as "putting vulnerability first." Ultimately, "to imitate God" (p. 174) means to be charitable. Lesch argues that the centrality of *chesed* is derived from God's covenant with His people, which manifested itself in the miracle of the parting of the Red Sea and the destruction of the Pharaoh's army: just like God showed *chesed* toward the Israelites, so, too, "the Israelites themselves are enjoined to show *chesed* toward every 'individual dependent on others, lacking security, subject to the might of the mighty'" (p. 177). For Lesch, this understanding of the covenant reveals the possibility that human beings, "without divine assistance" (p. 178), can attain the kind of ethical community that even Kant believed was attainable only messianically. My final question is this: Does Lesch think that the Jewish conception of the covenant with God somehow excludes the messianic development of a people's relation with God? Or is it rather the other way around—that God's covenant with this specific people assigned them, and no other, a messianic function in human history?

Lesch's book offers one of the most convincing arguments in the current literature as to why liberalism needs a political theology to counteract clear ethical deficits that emerge because of basic social structures that in many ways exacerbate what Kant called the "unsocial sociability" of human beings. Lesch is convinced this ethical supplement has a religious source. His book offers a concrete model, drawn from Jewish thought, as to how liberalism can draw from such sources the nectar of solidarity while keeping out some of the poison that has always made liberalism

wary of receiving religious support for its social and political order. In so doing, Lesch assumes that religion is fundamentally an ethical and moral enterprise. In my view, however, the point of political theology is to show that “religion” and “theology” are political and legal constructions from the start. This is what gives them not only their evident capacity to secure political and social order, but it is also what keeps them from being pure vehicles of ethical redemption.

### Response to Miguel Vatter’s Review of *Solidarity in a Secular Age: From Political Theology to Jewish Philosophy*

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— Charles H. T. Lesch 

I am grateful to Miguel Vatter for his very kind words about my book, the seriousness with which he approached it, and his thoughtful questions. In his précis of my argument, Vatter describes the original theory of solidarity I develop as a political theology. I would like to challenge that description, and, in doing so, elaborate on the book’s interpretive, conceptual, and normative claims. Debates about political theology might seem abstruse. I believe their moral and political stakes are high.

Schmitt proposed two theses on political theology: an historical thesis, in which important concepts in modern political thought originated from analogies to theology; and a psychological thesis, where human beings’ cognitive orientation toward politics mirrors their orientation to the divine (*Political Theology*, 2005, p. 36). I believe that Schmitt’s historical thesis is correct, and the first part of *Solidarity in a Secular Age* shows how Rousseau, Kant, and Habermas, contrary to standard readings, each theorize features of solidarity by turning to concepts inherited from religion. Unlike nearly all liberal theorists, I also think that Schmitt’s psychological thesis contains an important insight: human beings have certain nonrational desires, historically associated with religion, that are crucial for moral motivation but are not satisfied by liberal institutions alone. In responding, the book’s second part draws from Levinas, Buber, and Eliot to theorize a solidarity that accounts for the nonrational psyche but promotes liberal ideals.

The fundamental divide between Vatter and me is this: for Vatter, religion is always already political. Every theology implies a politics and every politics a theology—a discourse that is deployed to serve power. The key for him, therefore, is to balance that power, to find a political theology that will turn us all into gods. I believe this response surrenders too much to politics. To be sure, no one writing after Machiavelli, Marx, and Dostoevsky can be naïve about religion. But that does not make politics dispositive. Our lives unfold within a universal moral

order that is prior to any considerations of power. Religion, as the earliest and most constant human institution to grasp that order, can provide us with resources for understanding and acting within it. Moreover, acknowledging such resources requires neither faith nor theology—only the shared intuition that we are called to do good. My point, then, is not that modern Jewish thought gives us an alternative political theology. It is precisely that it provides an alternative *to* political theology, a different way of gleaning religion’s insights without reducing them to political analogues—without instrumentalizing religion in the service of politics.

This nonreductive approach to political theology also grounds my response to Vatter’s questions. With Levinas and Buber, for example, Vatter assumes the ontological priority of politics: in Levinas, that “divine revelation is structured legally and politically from the start”; whereas in Buber, that theopolitics implies a “political society” at odds with liberalism. Yet in both cases, this is imposing political theology where it does not exist. Levinas argues that we should apprehend people just as we apprehend God in negative theology, yielding an ethical relation to the other that I call “solidarity as sacrifice” (pp. 133–40). He takes Maimonides’s apophatic account as a model for our moral epistemology, not political order (pp. 127–33). Buber’s theopolitics, which I show he consciously developed as a response to Schmitt’s political theology (pp. 150–61), is likewise incompatible with liberalism only if we disregard Buber’s own stipulated distinction between institution and ethos. Our interaction with a coworker, for instance, might formally fit into the “economic” sphere. But in actually relating to this person, he should be seen not as an interchangeable economic actor, but as a unique human being with his own needs and vulnerabilities (pp. 179–81). Liberalism’s “art of separation” (Michael Walzer, “Liberalism and the Art of Separation,” *Political Theory*, 12(3), 1984) between spheres is maintained in law; but in our solidarity with others, we recognize that such boundaries are in fact fictional.

What kind of solidarity can liberalism achieve and how? If politics is as ubiquitous as Vatter suggests, then our moral agency is limited. Power and domination are ineluctable—except by God’s grace. This, I showed, was in fact Kant’s conclusion in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*: if spontaneity, the kernel of our moral agency, is “radically evil”—predisposed to spurn the moral law—then a fully realized solidarity, what Kant calls the “ethical community,” can be achieved only through a miraculous transformation of human nature (pp. 78–82). To this fundamentally Christian notion of redemption-via-grace, Buber counters with Judaism’s vision of redemption-via-freedom. Human beings themselves, without divine assistance, can achieve a genuine solidarity (pp. 175–79). They can choose to practice *chesed*, a word most accurately

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defined not as “charity,” which implies formal and mutual obligations (and is associated with the Hebrew *tzedakah*), but “kindness”—a giving to the other without expectation of reciprocity, an imitation of God’s “overflow” of being into the world (pp. 173–75–).

Although this vision is derived from Jewish sources, it is intended as a model for all people. God need not part the sea for us. Nor is our solidarity fated by some political

theology. To the contrary: it is created by *us* through sharing fate with others. We identify with the welfare of some group of people. We sacrifice for them and put their vulnerability first. We envision a collective destiny in which relations of power are not balanced in antagonism but minimized into irrelevance. Can liberalism succeed in cultivating such a solidarity? That is in our hands to decide.