# DMYTRO SHEVCHUK

# KATERYNA SHEVCHUK

# POLITICS BETWEEN THEOLOGY AND MESSIANISM IN SECULAR TIMES

**Dmytro Shevchuk**
The National University of Ostroh Academy, Department of Culture Science and Philosophy, Ostroh, Rivne Region, Ukraine.
**Email**: dmytro.shevchuk@oa.edu.ua

**Kateryna Shevchuk**
Rivne State Humanitarian University, Department of Philosophy, Rivne, Ukraine.
**Email**: katarzynashevchuk@gmail.com

**Abstract**: The article is devoted to the analysis of political theology, messianism and their influence on the modern politics. The authors pay attention to the fact that every political theory (or political philosophy) has reference to the ideal state, the most obvious example of which is the transfer of religious concepts and ideas to the political domain. This transfer has two major consequences: the first of them is an act of transcendence which generates the political theology; the second is an act of immanence, which generates the political messianism. The political theology and messianism are seeking to carry meanings that not only explain but in a certain way construct the vision of the political and its historical manifestations. The political theology and political messianism of modernity have some specific caused by the peculiarities of the secularization. The authors refer to the relations between politics and religion in the secular times which is a topical issue of modern political philosophy. Such questions as the essence of the political theology and messianism, the genesis of modern political theology and the appearance of messianism in the political world are investigated.

## 1. Introduction

Every political conception has connections with the fact that comprehension of the politics includes not only description of the current situation, but also a kind of attempt to compare the actual situation with the ideal state of society (or common good) and get to it as close as possible. This aspect of the political reality comprehension was noticed by K. Mannheim in the classical book *Ideology and Utopia*: "But every 'actually operating' order of life is at the same time enmeshed by conceptions which are to be designated as 'transcendent' or 'unreal' because their contents can never be realized in the societies in which they exist and because one could not live and act according to them within the limits of the existing social order." (Mannheim 1954, 175).

The political theory (or political philosophy) has reference to the ideal state, the most obvious example of which is the transfer of the religious concepts and ideas to the political domain. This transfer has two major consequences: the first of them is an act of transcendence, which generates the political theology; the second is an act of immanence, which generates the political messianism.

The acts of transcendence and immanence in political domain refers to the meaningful representation of the *sacrum* and *profanum* as ontological dimensions of the political world. An experience of transcendence is the fundamental human experience known since the ancient times. It displays human desire to know the deepest and most basic foundations of the world. Moreover, the humans want to rise above themselves and find Supreme Being as a basis for their beings. The experience of immanence displays the desire to merge with the world and locate the strength of action in it; this experience demonstrates reliance on the internal sense of being. However, this experience also reaches deep foundations of human existence.

Analysis of historical forms and modern transformations of political theology and messianism gives a possibility to understand the fundamental ontological foundations of the political world and the relationship between politics and religion. Also, such philosophical investigation shows the correlation between *the political* and *the sacred*. It seems that such correlation is universal for all political worlds. For example, Merio Scattola states that all human communities have the political theology because they are establishing the connections between specialization of political roles and certain mystical and ritual forms of social life. Moreover, the members of communities correlate their present-days with sacred dimensions of eternity (Scattola 2011, 9). However, we should state that all human activities could be correlated with rituals. Thus, we can agree with statements that a ritual is common to the entire

human activity. But, it is important to pay attention to the specific role of rituals in the political sphere. They are effective instruments of establishing the collective identity, consensus of values, legitimacy of actual power institutions, and nation-building process. Although, we should take into account the situation when modern liberal societies that are characterized rather by pluralism and conflict of values. Therefore, the political rituals could play a role of social conflict expression and demand of the change. They are also establishing differences between "us" and "others" and manifesting *the political* as antagonistic.

The political theology and messianism are the keys for the comprehension of socio-cultural mechanism of the political world forming. The theological and messianic projects demonstrate the specifics of political phenomena historiosophic interpretation because they have a strong connection to the eschatological perspective of history understanding which is appropriate to the politics. By taking the development of political theology as a frame, we have a proposition to divide the history of European societies into two main periods: the epoch of transcendence (from the ancient times to Enlightenment) and the epoch of secularization (from the Enlightenment to modern times). The (post-)modernity shows the fall of the authority of religious institutions traditionally linked to the political life of society. Moreover, it is also evident that religion "imbues" the private sphere and stays one of the grounds for individual self-identification in the era of global "liquid" social hierarchies. All of these happens in the context of religious fundamentalism "dilution", because of democratic pluralism strengthening, which involves the individual autonomy.

## 2. The essence of the political theology and messianism

The relations between politics and religion in the secular times is the topical issue of the modern political philosophy. It has been inspired by Carl Schmitt and his book titled *Political theology*. This book was a kind of response to the challenge of secularization in the modern political world. However, we'd like to note that there still is an ambiguity in terms of precise definition of secularization.

The easiest way to define "secularization" is to note the decline of religious faith, the loss of credibility to the church in the modern times. However, such definition is not enough because it does not display the actual situation in societies correctly (recently, we could observe the growth in the numbers of believers in the post-communist countries, and the strong position of religion in Islamic countries, for example).

The classical conception of secularization was presented by Max Weber within his sociology of religion where secularization was presented mostly as the compromise between the religious values and the values of

secular institutions. Also, this classical conception predicted that modernization and rationalization of society will be caused by the decline of religion. It happens as elimination of religious valued behavior which loses its meaning by adopting to secular purposes. This conception of secularization has some limits, which makes it not completely appropriate to contemporary world. Therefore, we should refer to revised conception of secularization. For example, Jose Casanova writes that the meaningful conception of secularization needs to distinguish three different connotations: 1) secularization as decline of religious beliefs and practices in modern societies (this process is often postulated as a universal, human, developmental process); 2) secularization as the privatization of religion; 3) secularization as the differentiation of the secular spheres (this process is usually understood as a kind of emancipation from religious institutions and norms) (Casanova 2007, 101). As we can observe it's difficult to concentrate on some separate meaning of secularization in modern world. Moreover, we should note multiplicity and complexity of this process. Thus, in the modern global world there are different evidences of modernization and secularization. In this context, we assume that the reference to political theology and messianism can give an opportunity to reveal and understand some universal principles and specific features of secularization in the modern political world.

The political theology and messianism are seeking to carry meanings that not only explain but in a certain way construct the vision of *the political* and its historical manifestations. First of all the political religions with immanence and transcendence as their components generate the political mythology which causes an unauthentic form of human being in the political world.

Within historiosophic approach to the problem of human being as *bios politicos*, the conceptions of political theology and messianism are used as a methodological instrument for the analysis of totalitarian systems in the 20th century. The totalitarianism is presented as a kind of political religion (E. Voegelin, R. Aron). Therefore, the new political critique arises through referring to the relations between politics and religion. Sometimes it reinstates in the idea of the political theory revival as a system of values.

We should say that "political theology" is also a term which does not have single conventional definition. Its definitions are often opposed, showing the position of authors in discussions on the merits of political theology and its importance in the context of current political and religious processes. However, the common aspect we have found in almost all contemporary discussions dedicated the political theology concerns the meaning and consequences of secularization and its influence on the comprehension of the modern political processes. In the context of such reflection, we want to mention the C. Schmitt's claim that "all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological

concepts." (Schmitt 2005, 36). Thus, the grasp of the political theology essence helps to understand the specifics of politics in a secular age.

The statement about multiple meanings of the term "political theology" requires summarizing its different types. The classification of political theology (E.-W. Bökenförde), which bases on the semantic meaning of the term, presents three main types – legal (implies the transition of theological concepts to the domain of state and law), institutional (concerns such issues as status, legitimacy, and essence of political order.), and appellate (deals with the interpretation of the Christian idea of Divine Revelation in the aspect of believers' engagement into politics).

Based on these three types of political theology we can formulate a general definition: the political theology is a form of understanding the politics and political world based on the interpretation of political phenomena by using the reference to the perspective of Divine Revelation. In the core of such definition, there is a problem of relations between political theology and political theory. Within modern political philosophy, the solving of this problem is tightly connected to the methodological propositions and meta-philosophical conceptions.

Leo Strauss elaborated the solution by making the principal distinction between political theology and philosophy. The criterion for this distinction bases on the notion that theology can be interpreted as a political doctrine basing on Divine Revelation, while philosophy is essentially limited only by the facts that are available for the human mind (Strauss 1989, 7). The philosopher does not recognize the absolute holiness and search rational explanations, while theology recognizes a miracle as a way of Divine manifestation in history. However, Strauss is convinced of the interplay between theology and philosophy. The kind of intellectual tension between them determines the nature of Western civilization. It is also evident that the conflict between theology and philosophy is determined by their mutual exclusion: "No one can be both a philosopher and a theologian or, for that matter, a third which is beyond the conflict between philosophy and theology, or a synthesis of both. But every one of us can be and ought to be either the one or the other, the philosopher open to the challenge of theology or the theologian open to the challenge of philosophy." (Strauss 1979, 111).

In some aspect, the political theology serves as a strategy for the self-understanding of political philosophy that seeks the way to define and realize its position. This understanding of the relationship between theology and philosophy is defined by Heinrich Meier, who writes that political philosophy should recognize the strength of political theology and reflect on it. In the polemic with theology, philosophy can get a clear vision of its subject and principles (Meier 2003-2004, 183-184).

## 3. The genesis of the modern political theology

The phenomenon of political theology has a history as ancient as a philosophy. It reaches the ancient Greek and Roman times. The ancient political theology grows on the ground of organic unity of politics and religion that usually were not separated. The same situation was in the middle ages. As John Milbank writes, "Once, there was no 'secular'. And the secular was not latent, waiting to fill more space with the steam of the 'purely human', when the pressure of the sacred was relaxed. Instead there was the single community of Christendom, with its dual aspects of sacerdotium and regnum." (Milbank 2006, 9).

The political community was fully identified as the religious community. Some philosophers used the terms to denominate the similarity between politics and religion – for example, "civil religion" (A. de Tocqueville).

The Christianity changed relations between religion and politics. It brought the "quasi-apolitical character." We mean the consequences of the declared division between political and religious domains which was represented by Jesus Christ phrase: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." The principle "Caesar – Caesar's, and God – God's" stayed a precondition for establishing the sovereignty of individual and its role in creations the political order. The "quasi-apolitical" character of Christianity shows that in reality, it began its politics. Such politics proclaimed the new type of human community. This community is perfect, but it is not transcendent and inscribed in history in the form of Church. The political theology changed because it had to pay attention, not to the good that is transcendent and regulated the political world outside, but to the mechanisms of internal community governance.

Another phenomenon was added to the changes of political theology because Christianity brought the eschatological dimension of history. Eschaton is not only defined as the end of the history, but it also refers to the moment when history gets its highest meaning. From the Christian point of view, the Eschaton means the end of the period characterized by alienation of the God. The new epoch and new world started from the moment of Christ's coming and will get its fullness with the Second Coming. The idea of Eschaton largely explains the further development of political-theological and messianic projects as the strategies for the establishing a new order of the political world.

The Christian paradigm of political theology transformed in the early modern times. The political science of this period can be defined as "negative theology" because it tried to supplant *sacrum* from the political world. The attempts of neutralizing the Christian eschatological project or "de-deification of the public life" (as Carl Schmitt argued) manifested in reflections about the essence of *the political.* The negative theology got a

form of the "political theology of absence." Merio Scattola writes, "[...] from the nihilistic perspective, the divine order is present only as an absolute absence, and the only one way of God's Revelation is His disappearance." (Scattola 2011, 124).

In this situation, the human experience of politics demonstrated the only dimension of immanence. Also, the political Sovereign totally manages the religious cases. Sovereign acquired this right as a result of merging the State and the Church. In *De Cive*, Thomas Hobbes presented an expression of this idea: "[...] *a City of Christian men,* and a *Church,* is altogether the same thing, of the same men, term'd by two names, for two causes: For the *matter of a City* & a *Church* is one, to wit the same Christian men. And the *forme* which consists in a Lawfull power of assembling them is the same too; for 'tis manifest that every Subject is oblig'd to come thither, whither he is summon'd by his *City.* Now that which is call'd a *City,* as it is made up of *men,* the same, as it consists of *Christians,* is styled a *Church.*" (Hobbes 1983, 236).

The connections between theology and political theory in the early modern times explain the introduction of new politics demonstrating the tendency towards the autonomy. Milbank demonstrates, how the theology constructed the secular politics (Milbank 2006, 14-15). The new politics' priorities were "unrestricted" private property, "absolute sovereignty," and "active rights." Moreover, the new political anthropology postulated the human persons as individuals. The theology assisted the establishing of new anthropology. At the same time the political science of early modern times paid attention to the necessity of inventing a secular space, which should be an area of "pure power." This invention was also a theological achievement since it required confirmation opportunities of God's nonexistence, that could be expressed only within theology.

The contemporary political theology changed its essence and principles. In particular, it presented the critical attitude to the current state of religion and engagement of the Church in political affairs. The theological comprehension of political issues seeks to oppose the privatization of religious life, which often occurs in the context of (post-) modernity. Therefore, the political theology experiences certain transformations; it leaves the status of an instrument providing legitimacy for the government and political order and demonstrates the capability in a new status of critical comprehension of theological and political problems.

The process of secularization causes some changes in relations between politics and religion. For example, the theological concepts acquire the political meaning. There is a political theology that serves as an instrument to build the secular theories. In particular, the outcomes of the secularization process establish pure procedural rationality, which reduces legitimacy to the legality techniques. As Carl Schmitt argued, the political system designed in the spirit of pure procedural rationality closed

in itself. We should add that in the political world where the only pure procedural (or even instrumental) rationality appears there is a dominance of total immanence. This system is not able to gain full legitimacy. As a result, this socio-political system gets into a nihilistic situation or the Nietzschean world where "God is dead."

The modern political theology tries to overcome the threat of its distortion. For example, one of such projects is described in the political theology of Johann Metz. This project has a messianic dimension, postulating it as "the word of God that delivered at this time." The positioning of Metz's political theology in the spectrum of different political and theological projects of modernity puts it into the opposition to decisionism which causes the politicization of Christianity, as it loses the eschatological dimension. The limitation of this political-theological project rootes in its origination from Catholicism. This version of political theology should be implemented by Church, which has become a critical institution of freedom of faith and refuses to use political means to achieve their goals. As Metz writes, Church must not realize its aims by using methods and tools associated with political power. It has a task not to prove its existence, but show the evidence for the history of holiness, which is open to all people (Metz 2000, 28). As a result, a new relationship between society and religion should be created, and this relationship will reflect the connections between eschatological faith and social practice.

The J. Metz's political theology with its saturation by messianism becomes a theology of revolution predicting a kind of messianic "anthropological revolution." This messianic project gets an anthropological dimension because it has an intention to become the instrument for social critique and diagnose for the de-humanistic tendencies in the modern political world. Sometimes the revolutionary setting of this political theology project admits criticism and its identification with the left-wing political movement. The reason could be in the establishment of the principle according to which the revolution must not be made from above (the Church hierarchy), it should rise from the bottom – the revolutionary "conversion of hearts" that will lead to the restructuring of the Church as a form of communal life. The consequence of such revolution will be the transition from the transcendence to "theology of mysticism", and in this way, the eschatological dimension of Christianity will be updated. Within this theological project, the concept of revolution is re-interpreted, because it fits into a messianic project. Therefore, the J. Metz's political theology of intends to be the hermeneutic basis for every political theology, laying the conditions for their understanding.

The theology of revolution is only one of the varieties of modern political theology. Mostly, it acquires the character of the emancipative program. This kind of emancipation theology (also "theology of liberation," "theology of peace," "feminist theology") is the use of Christ's ideas into the practice liberation of the oppressed and the poor through

the engagement in the social movements (Scattola 2011, 233). Emancipation joins the eschatology and actualizes the problems that need explanation within political theology.

## 4. The political messianism in the modern times

The gradual elimination of political theory' transcendence and focusing on immanence leads to the phenomenon of political messianism. Understanding the phenomenon of messianism, which is derived from Christianity, associated with Paul the Apostle, who in The Epistle to the Romans transfers the messianic experience into the inner world of human.

The distortion of the messianic project which causes its transformation into a political religion is dangerous for the human existence. The political religion is closely linked to the political ideologies and myths which can subsequently cause the arising of totalitarian systems. Unlike traditional religion formed over many centuries, having a strong connection to tradition and providing a reference to transcendence, the political religion is mostly satisfied with the mythology or ideology of humanity's salvation.

The conceptions of political religion and political messianism may appear as methodological frameworks to identify the symptoms of totalitarian ideology and non-authentic human being in the political world. It is manifested clearly in the political philosophy of Eric Voegelin, who presented an original interpretation of modern totalitarianism as a form of Gnosticism. Considering the problem of political representation, Voegelin pays attention to the issue of truth. He notes the fact that the existential representation of community is complemented by transcendent truth. If we turn by the first civilizations, it is noticeable that they are considered as the representants of higher transcendent order: "The empire is a cosmic analogue, a little world reflecting the order of the great, comprehensive world. Rulership becomes the task of securing the order of society in harmony with cosmic order; the territory of the empire is an analogical representation of the world with its four quarters; the great ceremonies of the empire represent the rhythm of the cosmos; festivals and sacrifices are a cosmic liturgy, a symbolic participation of the cosmion in the cosmos; and the ruler himself represents the society, because on earth he represents the transcendent power which maintains cosmic order." (Voegelin 1987, 54).

The political philosophy of Plato claimed the slogan of this new era – "polis is the great man." Therefore, the idea that society cannot develop by human cost complemented the transcendent truth. In other words, the human truth was correlated with the God's truth. The human being in the political world is authentic if it is open to God, and from the other side, God is manifesting in history only when He forms the human soul. So, in

the political philosophy of the ancient times, there were two kinds of truth – the truth of the cosmological empires and anthropological truth related to human existence in the public space of the polis. According to Voegelin, the sphere of power was subjected to the *de-divinization* that manifested itself in the historical process of polytheistic culture collapse. As the result of this process, the human existence in society was described in the perspective of destiny which leads to the eternity by the grace of God. However, the era of early modern times faced the problem of political representation, and there was a need of *re-divinization* the society. Voegelin argues that during this period polytheistic culture that reaches heretical movements in Christianity was revived. The ideas of this religious culture subsequently formed the basis for political movements of the twentieth century.

Therefore, it is possible to trace the connections between totalitarian systems of the 20th century (generated by communism and nazism) and mystical doctrines within Gnosticism. In Voegelin's works, the Gnosticism is defined as immanentization of the truth and desacralized conception of human salvation. *Re-divinization* causes the transfer of meaning from the transcendent God and human existence to history the result of which was an immanentization of Christian eschaton and spread of the the "end of story" idea that was the basis of political religions. As a result, energy is released, which is directed to the development of civilization. It may lead to the negative consequences: the speculation of Gnosticism exceeded uncertainty of faith, giving the human and his/her activities in the world sense of eschatological realization. The immanentization is grounding in human experience and, therefore, civilization becomes a mysterious case of self-salvation activity. This immanentization generates threat because it involves destructive (including autodestructive) activism and leads to the establishment of a false image of reality.

Voegelin gives the description of political Gnosticism: "The historical order of the people is broken by the rise of a movement which does not belong to 'this world'. Social evils cannot be reformed by legislation; defects of governmental machinery cannot be repaired by changes in the constitution; differences of opinion cannot be settled by compromise. 'This world' is darkness that must give way to the new light. Hence, coalition governments are impossible. The political figures of the old order cannot be re-elected in the new world; and the men who are not members of the movement will be deprived of their right to vote in the new order." (Voegelin 1987, 150).

Based on this description it is possible to highlight the following features of Gnosticism as the modern political movement: 1) the objection of actually existing political situation; 2) the statement that the bad organization of the world is cause by the existing the evil; 3) the conviction about the possibility of overcoming the evil in the world, and its salvation; 4) the statement that a change must take place in

evolutionary or revolutionary ways; 5) the Gnostics suggest that salvation comes as a result of our earthly efforts; 6) a mystical knowledge gets the great importance.

Implementation of the Gnostic eschatological concept has adverse consequences for human existence in the political world because it leads to the establishment of totalitarianism. In the aspect of ontological approach within political philosophy, totalitarianism is a total immanence of politics that provides for the closure and the inability to go beyond their limits. The modern political philosophy that seeks to criticism of totalitarianism (Hannah Arendt, Karl Popper, Raymond Aron) presents a conviction that totalitarianism takes deep roots in the human being. Therefore, the totalitarian system is not something external to human. In other words, we propose to define the totalitarianism as "the forced thinking" or "unanimity" and "anonymity" of political being. The feature of totalitarianism is that it takes away individual (his/her) destiny from human, embedding it in the political system.

Modern philosophy offers several ways to counter political messianism and immanence in political theory that lead to non-genuine human being in the political world. The first is based on the idea of rediscovering the relations with the transcendent God and awareness of human responsibility for the preservation of sacred values in the world. This idea is represented by Christian existentialism of Gabriel Marcel, for instance. He insists on existential human responsibility for the preservation of sacred values in history. The human must recognize that the historical source of his/her activity is the ability to transcendence, which appears as "taking me by God." This ability can overcome the domination of the "spirit of abstraction" that generates fanatical consciousness.

The second way is tied to the possibility to deconstruct the political myths that were generated by political religions. Such deconstruction could be realized through the critical analysis of the political mythology. The philosophy focuses on the overcoming of the myths (transition from myth to logos), but this is extremely difficult because the mythological consciousness creates its logic, which causes the non-sensitivity to rational arguments proposed by philosophical reflection. Thus, the myths and political religion may be destroyed, only if the mechanisms of their creation and the structure of functioning are well studied.

The third way to overcome the adverse effects of immanence in political activity is the "return" to the historiosophical vision of Aurelius Augustine, that involves an idea of the separating two cities – one earthly and one heavenly. German philosopher Walter Benjamin in *Theologico-Political Fragment* stated that the political order could not use the divine order as its basis. He wrote: "The Kingdom of God is not the *telos* of the historical dynamic; in cannot be set as a goal. From the standpoint of history, it is not the goal, but the end. Therefore, the order of the profane

cannot be built up on the idea of the Divine Kingdom." (Benjamin 1978, 312).

By using the distinction between the political world and divine order, we need to re-think the very idea of messianism.


## 5. Instead of conclusion

Philosophical analysis of the transcendence and immanence phe-nomena in the perspective of understanding the political theology and political messianism can show the possible negative consequences of the non-authentic human being in the political world. Such human condition presents that the natural relationship with *the political* is mediated by ideas, projects, and programs of the social reality transformation that were inspired by eschatological interpretation of history. Problems and distortions of political theology and political messianism are associated with the separation from tradition. Political theology begins to look for justifications only through abstract concepts (the view starts to dominate according to which "[...] in every political theology there is a question of political philosophy" (Scattola 2011, 238)). So, we can remember that the theological absolutism generated a political absolutism and they produce the forms of political being that will destroy each other, as Hans Blumenberg clearly noticed it (Blumenberg 1988). Separated from the practice of religious life theology loses its essence, then happens the recession of tradition. So, theology replaces the concept originating from the practice of liturgical life with the symbolic structures used for the comprehension of the political. Moreover, the biggest threat of the political and theological projects distortions lies in the rise of the political religions that present mythological reality for their followers  and make preconditions of conquering the masses by symbols.

Modern politics are often described in the terms of investment, costs, and predictions. This description confirms the rationalization of political activity, which manifests itself through the use of political technologies and the analysis of big data. Analyzing such descriptions, we can also talk about the immanentization as an political rationality mechanism. Politicians are looking for internal mechanisms of effective manipulation with the political order. However, this immanentization has a slightly different character than in the case of the political messianism. It is more about instrumentalism, which uses, for example, religion as an instrument, turning it into just an ideology. Although the origins of such a modern attitude to the politics should be sought through the reference to the modern re-thinking of the mechanisms of transcendence and immanentization involved in the political theology and messianism.

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