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On Community in the Political Theology of Jacob Taubes

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Abstract

The present paper aims to analyse through a systematic approach the notion of “community” encountered in the works of Jacob Taubes. Under a theologico-political scenario, the author discusses the political framework of Saint Paul in his Letter to the Romans. According to Taubes, the Apostle inaugurates a new type of sovereignty — acquired by the grace of God, and not by the divine law. Ultimately, the plan of Paul is to create a new “life” for the community of Christians through spirit (gr. πνεῦμα) and the highest form of love (gr. ἀγάπη). According to the author, the Letter to the Romans perfectly illustrates the transformation of the political, where the idea of hierarchy is replaced with the one of equilibrium; under this equation religion is not authority, but participation in community. From a more practical point of view, the political theology of Jacob Taubes is interested in answering the following dilemma: how is it possible for a community that sees its Lord crucified on the Cross not to create rebellions, but, on the contrary, to generally cultivate an obedient attitude towards state authority? Ultimately, while mapping the author’s understanding of community, the paper also brings into attention what the transformation of the political means for Taubes and why political theology is the scenario that accommodates the revolutionised community.

Keywords: *Community; political theology; the political; revolution; eschatology.*

1. Introduction

Jacob Taubes (1923-1987) is an important author of the twentieth century, with a significant contribution to the substantiation and development of the notion of “political theology”. His fields of expertise were the philosophy of religion and Jewish studies, with a special emphasis on the connection between Judaism and Christianity. The present study is interested the work of Taubes entitled “The Political Theology of Paul” (2003), since its content reveals fundamental answers towards a re-formulation of the political theology, as known from the famous works of Carl Schmitt. As a preliminary remark, it should be noted that the concept of political theology stands for (at least) a triple understanding: one juridical, one institutional and one appellative. The first one, whose main contributor is C. Schmitt, is drawing on the transfer of theological concepts to the domains of the state and law; the second one is proposing a judgement of the political order through the lens of the belief in God; and the third one constitutes the

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interpretation of the Gospel in order to commit the Christians towards a particular real-life case (Böckenforde, 1983, pp. 16-25). The second understanding, namely the institutional political theology draws upon the incorporation of theological texts in the mechanism of legitimising the political power. In other words, this would be a hermeneutic, from which could emerge a genealogy of the mechanism of power. The political theology of Taubes is one of the examples that could fit this category of understanding the above mentioned concept.

2. Paul's critique to the Law

As drawn from "The Political Theology of Paul" (2003), the two major themes of the political theology developed by Taubes are the following: on one hand, the tension between Moses and Paul, and on the other hand, the theme of founding a community, a people (Taubes, 2003, p. 3). The juxtaposition of the two themes constitutes the structure of the political theology of Taubes. While Schmitt's political theology speaks of the representation of power in the sense of legitimising the authority of the sovereign, the political theology of Taubes describes the same representation in the sense of legitimising the community. To answer the question "what does it mean to be the founder of a people?", Taubes transposes the community into a messianic logic in which its members are united by deeds and faith. Moreover, the general theme of this political theology is that of the relationship between political and divine authority, and in Taubes' view, this is mirrored in the Jewish history of religion.

While analysing the Letter to the Romans, J. Taubes points out that St. Paul's political genius is based on two important characteristics: diplomatic sense and the ability to locate the power. Paul's ultimate goal was to establish an opposing power (Taubes 2003, p. 16). The apostle's missionary activity is special because it aims to "gather" and hold together people of the community up to the ends of the world. It was the case of the community in Rome as well, since it had different particularities to the rest of the Christian communities; here, the emphasis falls on the differences between Jewish-Christians and pagan-Christians. The problems that the messenger of Christ must solve are first of a practical nature, and then of a theological one, and among them can be enumerated the problem of circumcision or the problem of commensality. Paul deals with these differences from the perspective of the Law. The critique to the Law is addressed not so much to the Pharisees, but especially to those who oppose the imperial cult. More precisely, as Agamben points out, in every Pauline epistle, the law operates by establishing divisions and separations (Agamben, 2005, p. 47). The same author also shows that for Paul, whether it is the terms *Ἰσραὴλ*, *Ἑβραῖος* and *Ἰουδαῖος*, they all designate the members of the whole people (the whole Am = Israel), concluding to the remark that the term "people" itself is "traversed by an originary theological-political fault" (Agamben, 2005, p. 47). Having these considerations, it can be argued that, in the moment the apostle states that "all (*πᾶς*) Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11:26), he is referring to all who recognize Jesus as the Messiah. According to Paul, Christ is the fulfilment of the Law, thus opposing the

Roman *nomos* becomes essential. Here Paul exposes with clarity the political problem he faces in Rome: the people refuse to accept the Messiah, and even worse, they condemned Messiah according to the Law. For this reason, the act of founding a new people of God becomes justified. Through this, the Pauline revolution proposes the conversion of the existing *nomos* from *summum bonum* into a universalism that passes through the “eye of the needle of the crucified one” (Taubes, 2003, p. 24). According to Taubes, the political responsibility of Paul cannot be confounded with the idea of constituting a new political regime through revolution, but his effort focuses on the idea of de-legitimisation of a political power as a political attitude (Terpstra & De Wit, 2000, p. 324).

3. Specifics of the newly established Community

The new religious community of people is based on the faith in the Saviour, thus shifting to the background the political power on which the community was dependent. In relation to power, the community no longer needs an intermediary, as its devotion to Christ – where love aims at the realization of *pas Israel* – is sufficient. In this context, it is worth mentioning that in the final chapters of the Epistle to the Romans, Paul seeks to give meaning to the statement “so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (Rom. 12: 5), describing the life forms of the Christian community through *πνεῦμα* and in *ἀγάπη*. Thus, as Taubes states, from a political sociology point of view “a new kind of union, a new intimacy is created” (Taubes, 2003, p. 52). This corpus is eschatologically oriented, meaning that they do not act as God, but live in Christ. Finally, Paul offers to the newly established community the solution of fulfilling the Law in the perspective of salvation, which is summarised as follows: love your neighbour as yourself. Through this, comments Taubes, “the man becomes in a real sense over-individual, and transcends himself through the lives of others” (Taubes 2019, p. 184). Participation in the pneumatic body of God means for the individual, above all, the assumption of love.

In the 13th chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, Paul summarises his political mission in a unique way. For the new community to endure over time, he makes sure that its members do not aspire to power and revolution, but instead have an obedient attitude towards power and respect the status quo. Although the plan of salvation – which becomes the new stake of the community – is realised by overthrowing the previous rational universe, Paul proposes that the loyalty of men is to be transferred to an authority superior to any earthly ruler.

4. Concluding Remarks

The present paper exposed that Paul (especially in the Letter to the Romans) proposed a political theology with a double understanding: firstly, as a revolutionised political attitude through which the establishment of Christ as the ruler of the world is recognised; and secondly, as a redefinition of the relations

between community members. Through this, the political is transformed, where the idea of hierarchy is replaced with the one of equilibrium and thus a mystical equation “vox populi vox Dei” is formulated (Taubes, 2019, p. 183). Moreover, it could be concluded that the mystical experience of the political is decisively changed by the dynamics of the coming of the Messiah, for under the new configuration, the people alone have the capacity to be sovereign, so to be the ultimate authority. Ultimately, the universal church of Christ remains a corpus mysticum that does not “incarnate” itself in the structure of a civil government, so that the principles of political power continue to be exercised as established by divine authority.

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