



Divine Democracy: Three Questions

Sofia Näsström

To cite this article: Sofia Näsström (2022) Divine Democracy: Three Questions, Political Theology, 23:3, 231-235, DOI: [10.1080/1462317X.2022.2071790](https://doi.org/10.1080/1462317X.2022.2071790)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1462317X.2022.2071790>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 02 May 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 112



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

ESSAY



Divine Democracy: Three Questions

Sofia Näsström

Department of Government, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

It is difficult to imagine a more topical issue than the one addressed in this book. After the election of Trump in 2016, and the turbulent years leading up to his refusal to admit defeat in the presidential election in 2020, public debates in many democratic countries have come to center on a distinction between “fact” and “faith.” The fact that Trump lost the election stands against faith in his assertion that the election was stolen. How do you reason with faith? Numerous scholars, politicians and public intellectuals have called for fact-checks to protect democracy against the spread of populist delusions and conspiracies. Reading Miguel Vatter’s impressive book *Divine Democracy: Political Theology after Schmitt*, however, it is clear that pitting fact against faith is to be tone-deaf to the historically fraught relationship between religion and politics. Indeed, the widespread surprise at the revival of faith-based claims in contemporary democracies is but a symptom of our loss. In the words of Claude Lefort, it testifies to “the difficulty democracy has of reading its story.” (Vatter 2020, 1).

Divine Democracy sets out to read the story of democracy through the lens of political theology. It is an immensely learned book, filled with nuanced arguments and conversations on the relationship between politics and religion. Together they seek to answer one major question: “can political theology be democratic?” (p.5) The question is warranted. Political theology centers on an analogy between the will of God and the sovereign decision-maker. Ever since Schmitt made that analogy, and asserted that “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts,” two suspicions hover over democratic theory: that modern democracy cannot do without theological backup, and that the theological backup in question is non-democratic. The worry is that by uncovering the theological undercurrents of democracy, one buttresses the decisionist power of the sovereign, and/or one gives credence to the violent resurgence of faith in politics.

The central message of *Divine Democracy* is that this worry is exaggerated. Political theology *can* be democratic. The substitute for God in democracy is not the sovereign decision-maker deciding upon the state of exception. The theological element in democracy “resides in a series of political institutions, practices and conceptions of modern democracy that call into question the primacy of sovereignty”; including conceptions like government, representation, universal human rights and public reason (5). This call for “a political theology without sovereignty” (3) is attractive, not only for its

CONTACT Sofia Näsström ✉ Sofia.Nasstrom@statsvet.uu.se 📍 Department of Government, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

effort to wrest the doctrine of political theology out of the hands of “sovransists.” It opens up a number of ordinary democratic practices to political-theological analysis. Take the fact that democratic elections require gracious losers. In democracies, we count heads; we do not smash them. And if we lose an election, we hope for political betterment by mobilizing for the next. This combination of self-restraint and faith is admirable. But where does it come from?

In this short commentary, I will not discuss the credibility of the specific interpretations made in the book, which include readings of Schmitt, Voegelin, Maritain, Kantorowicz and Habermas. I leave that for others who are more familiar with their works than I am. Instead, I would like to address three topics that pertain to the significance of the overall argument made in the book; namely that political theology can be democratic. These topics can be summarized in three questions: Is democracy “good”? Is the emergence of faith-based critique of modern democratic institutions the symptom of a sacralization or secularization of politics? And finally, what is the status of the claim that political theology can be democratic – is it scientific, polemical and/or strategic? These questions are raised in a curious and friendly spirit. They come from someone who is sympathetic to the endeavor of separating democracy from sovereignty, yet who is not entirely convinced that democracy needs political theological backup.

According to Schmitt, democracy rests on theological structures. These theological structures emerge in the legitimation of democracy, which is the place where religion and politics meet: “Legitimacy assumes that the activity of ruling and being ruled, at some basic level, is good and should be sanctified.” (1). The same insight guides this book. By demanding legitimation, democracy operates in the realm of the good (16). At the same time, Vatter is acutely aware of the fact that things can go terribly wrong, even in states professing to be democratic. This is why, he argues, political theology took “a democratic turn” after the Second World War: in reaction to the emergence of totalitarianism. There was a suspicion that political theology—in the sovereign and decisionist shape it took by Schmitt—could contribute to the dismantling of democratic institutions and practices. The contempt for the deliberative procedures in parliament, and the call for a sovereign to step in and “save” people from politicians who cannot decide between Christ and Barabbas—or between friend and enemy—had political theological underpinnings.

If we assume that political theology in its sovereign incarnation is dangerous, how about its democratic incarnation? As I interpret Vatter’s hypothesis in this book, political theology with sovereignty could pave the way for the degeneration of democracy into totalitarianism. Political theology without sovereignty, by contrast, can be democratic. It can foster a plurality of institutions and practices that rebel against claims for sovereign power. The question though is what it means to argue that political theology can be democratic. Does it mean that democracy—manifested in political institutions like parliaments and elections, for example—by its nature is good and sanctified? Is the hypothesis of *Divine Democracy* that as long as we separate political theology from sovereignty, it will be on the right side of history? Or is a political theological reading of democracy capable of harboring both good and evil, including a basic doubt about what is what?

In the chapters on representation (Voegelin) and government (Kantorowicz), Vatter addresses the mystical body of the people in modern democracy, a question that is also central to Lefort’s work on democracy. According to Lefort, democracy is not by its nature good, benevolent or divine. It is essentially *ambiguous*. If the body of the king

was the unitary anchor of the monarchical regime, the people in a democracy does not have an essence. On the contrary, the “empty place of power” symbolizes the uncertainty that the democratic revolution opens up in society about what is good, right and true, and this uncertainty is itself embodied in democratic institutions and practices. Democratic institutions and practices can sustain a state of civil contestation among people, but they can also tilt and foster a quest for totalitarianism: a state “free from divisions” (Lefort 1988, 19). This ambiguity is particularly clear in the case of elections.

On the one hand, elections pivot on a fundamental uncertainty about what is to come, and this is good. Since no one has the final say on who “we, the people” are, new voices, interests and claims can enter the scene and demand political betterment. Ultimately, this is why we count in democracies: There is no unity at the bottom of democracy, only a reference to a people that itself remains divided on the purpose and direction of society (Lefort 1988, 18). On the other hand, the uncertainty about what comes next can also be destructive for democracy. For, while the monarchical society rested on a tacit knowledge of what one meant to the other—everyone, even the king, had its divinely sanctioned social role to perform—democracy breaks with this idea of a society composed of already given social statuses. It demands of us to choose our networks, and invent our social roles. Who am I? Why am I here? As Lefort stresses, the discovery that power belongs to no one can be disconcerting. It may prompt a desire to “banish the indeterminateness that haunts the democratic experience” (Lefort 1986, 305), and the result is a new form of tyranny in the form of totalitarianism. Unlike monarchy, democracy lacks an external restraint in the form of divine right.

Perhaps Vatter interprets Lefort differently, or he agrees with this reading. The important question is whether the thesis of divine democracy accepts the possibility of a *democratically generated* degeneration of democracy. Is totalitarianism the shadow theory of a political theology of sovereignty or democracy? If we agree that political theology can be democratic, and that the political theological element of legitimizing democracy resides in a series of political institutions like elections, parties and parliaments, how to judge the critique levelled against them? Does a political theological reading of democracy imply that those who rebel against these institutions are “illegitimate” by default?

This leads up to the second issue, which concerns how to interpret the critique raised against modern democracy by populist leaders and movements. Populism is a notoriously difficult concept to define, and as scholars argue, it has both democratic and non-democratic connotations. It can be a threat or a corrective to democracy, all depending on the underlying historical and political context (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). In this book, Vatter calls our attention to the difficulty democracy has of reading its story, and this story includes the link between political theology and populism. “The religious is reactivated at the weak points of the social,” observes Lefort (1988, 25) and today “the social question” is back in politics. When people suffer from economic insecurity and social degradation due to the neoliberal stealth revolution (Brown 2015; Näsström 2021), and when this insecurity and degradation happen under democracy’s watch, the religious element comes back to haunt democracy: What is democracy good for? Why should we support it? In many consolidated democracies, people now question the legitimacy of politicians, professionals, public media and parties with reference to faith rather than fact: “Politicians are cannibals.” “Vaccines kill.” “Public news are fake.” “The election was stolen.” The question is how to interpret this faith-based critique of modern

democratic institutions. Does it signal a sacralization or secularization of democratic politics?

On the face of it, the critique of democratic institutions points to a sacralization of politics. It is often sanctioned with reference to spiritual sources, including New Age, and the rhetoric of populist leaders being Prophets or Messengers abound. Still, if we concur with Vatter that democratic institutions and practices themselves harbor a political theological element, there is also another possibility. The critique could be a symptom of secularization: a loss of faith. People no longer have faith in the idea that one can lose an election without being “a loser.” Democratic institutions like elections hinge on civility, patience and equality, but perhaps these are no longer attractive values. Perhaps people have changed their basic norms, and this affects the legitimacy of democratic institutions. Would this imply that there is an end to the role of political theology in democratic politics? Or is this disappointment with modern democratic institutions another instance of how political theology inserts itself in the legitimation of modern democracy?

Finally, I would like to address a point that Vatter makes in his analysis of Schmitt and Maritain. It has to do with the meaning of political theology. Is it scientific, polemical and/or strategic? The same question can be posed to Vatter. What is the meaning of showing that political theology can be democratic? In his analysis of Schmitt, Vatter distinguishes between a scientific and polemical meaning of political theology. Political theology is scientific when it studies how concepts developed in theology and jurisprudence are “transposed” from one area to the other, “among which harmonious exchanges are permitted and meaningful.” Differently put, it is a way of doing “sociology” to the concept of sovereignty (22). A polemical reading, by contrast, alludes to Schmitt’s anti-liberalism and anti-Judaism. It refers to the use of political theology to attack a position that one disagrees with. The polemical reading has affinities with Quentin Skinner’s methodological suggestion that we should interpret Hobbes’s argument in *Leviathan* as if he was standing in parliament making an argument in defense of the king, Charles I. At bottom, the self-proclaimed scientific work of Hobbes was a political attack on “the democratic gentlemen” in parliament.

One way to interpret Vatter’s argument in *Divine Democracy* would be to say that it is scientific. The analysis undertaken in the book aims to show that religion and politics, while in principle denoting two separate fields, are still analogous. We can learn much about the concept of democracy by studying theology, and vice versa. This is a plausible reading given that so much of our modern democratic vocabulary has theological connotations. As Vatter demonstrates, it ranges from representation to human rights, government and public reason. In addition, the tone and substance of *Divine Democracy* is systematic rather than polemical. There is little “politics” in it. Still, the book does have a clear adversary: the sovranists. The book is anti-sovereign at its core, and it is therefore not farfetched to read it as a polemic against those who believe that the proper remedy to the crisis of democracy is to awaken “the sleeping sovereign” (Tuck 2016). If Hobbes stands in parliament making a speech for the sovereign king, Vatter stands in the realm of sovereignty making a speech for parliament.

Still, there is yet another way to understand the meaning of political theology, and it is strategic. Maritain was involved in the codification of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights after World War II. The attempt to translate human rights into a charter of political rights was a sensitive matter, as people had different ideas about

their normative and religious foundations. Maritain insisted in public that the charter did not need a philosophical foundation. People from different countries, religions and traditions could agree on the practical affirmation of the charter of human rights without having to agree on their basic normative foundation. They could adopt a pragmatic attitude to the work of codification (112). But as Vatter notes, Maritain continued to maintain that human rights have a theological foundation, and this raises an important question: given that Maritain had already acknowledged in public that universal human rights are political rather than metaphysical, why insist on their foundation “in natural law and in a concept of divine providence?” (113).

Vatter’s thesis is that this attitude was strategic. Maritain’s interest in a theological grounding of human rights was intended to offer “a way to understand these rights as *an instrument of global governance or governmentality*” (116). Since governmentality does not go through sovereignty and law, but through “a panoply of control mechanisms, policing functions, and securitization policies,” he supported new social and economic rights, including bio-political rights to life (*ibid.*). The strategy was to secure divine providence through “the spread and recognition of the universality of human rights” (117). A strategic reading of Vatter’s book would suggest that he is onto something similar, and that this is what he alludes to with the title *Divine Democracy*. Democracy is political, and as such, it can find support by a plurality of conflicting metaphysical assumptions about what is right and good. Still, by underscoring its theological underpinnings the book aims to contribute to the survival of divine providence on earth.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Sofia Näsström is Professor in political theory at the Department of Government, Uppsala University. She is the author of two recent books on democracy, *The Spirit of Democracy. Corruption, Disintegration, Renewal* (Oxford University Press 2021), and *Democracy. A Small Book of Thoughts* (in Swedish, Historiska Media, 2021), and is currently working on a new book entitled *Democracy and the Social Question*.

References

- Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos. The Neoliberal Stealth Revolution*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.
- Lefort, Claude. In *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism*, edited by J. B. Thompson. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986.
- Lefort, Claude. *Democracy and Political Theory* tr. D. Macey. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988.
- Mudde, Cas, and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser. *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Näsström, Sofia. *The Spirit of Democracy. Corruption, Disintegration, Renewal*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2021.
- Tuck, Richard. *The Sleeping Sovereign*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016.
- Vatter, Miguel. *Divine Democracy. Political Theology After Schmitt*. Oxford, US: Oxford University Press, 2020.