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**Eschatologische Öffentlichkeit: Öffentlichkeit der Kirche und Politische Theologie im Werk von Erik Peterson [Review of Eschatologische Öffentlichkeit: Öffentlichkeit der Kirche und Politische Theologie im Werk von Erik Peterson by Roger Mielke]**

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**Eschatologische Öffentlichkeit : Öffentlichkeit der Kirche und Politische Theologie im Werk von Erik Peterson [Eschatological Publicity : The Publicity of the Church and Political Theology in the Work of Erik Peterson]**, Roger Mielke, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012 (ISBN 978-3-647-56371-8), 280 pp., hb €59,99

Erik Peterson was the best-known German Lutheran theologian of the interwar period to convert to Roman Catholicism. Nevertheless, notwithstanding the recent collection edited and translated by Michael Hollerich (*Theological Tractates*, Stanford University Press, 2011), the man and his work remain largely unknown outside his own country. Peterson perceived Europe to be on a boundary between a passing world of state-sponsored Christianity and a new era of democratic pluralism in which the place of the Church was far from assured.

Early in his study, Roger Mielke characterizes the concept of civil society [*die bürgerliche Gesellschaft*] with which Peterson contends in Habermasian terms as legitimated by rational public discourse. Peterson is, with good reason, deeply suspicious of the role of interest groups in such a society, and of their privileged interactions with the political powers, on which such purportedly rational discourse rests. As Hannah Arendt also saw, civil society is, in reality, founded on the colonization of the public realm by private interests. Moving beyond Arendt, however, Peterson offers a genealogy of liberal Weimar decadence in specifically ecclesial terms, tracing the privatisation of the Church back to its much earlier subjugation by regional political rulers [*das landesherrlichen Kirchenregiment*] and subsequent unification under the *Kaiserreich*. *Kulturprotestantismus* lent theoretical justification to this arrangement, which by collapsing the spiritual and political realms into one prepared the way for the totalitarian state of National Socialism.

Central to Peterson's 'concrete' theology was his high valuation of dogmatics and his commitment to its rational ordering but presentation in rhetorical style. This was far more than a bohemian academic pose. Christ has ascended away from the earth and reigns in heaven at the right

hand of the Father. Through dogmatics, however, he becomes present to the Church and thereby to the world. Drawing on Kierkegaard's theory of indirect communication, Mielke states: 'Das Dogma ist Index der Abwesenheit und verweist auf die Orte der Anwesenheit, der Selbstpräsentifikation Gottes.' (p. 61; 'Dogma indicates absence and makes reference to the places of presence, of the self-presentation of God.')

But which are these 'places of presence'? Peterson's concrete theology had two other distinctive features, both liturgically situated. The first was the witness of the martyrs, as commemorated and re-enacted in the liturgy. Theirs was the absolute witness of the Lordship of Christ against the lordship of the political powers. The second feature of Peterson's concrete theology was acclamation, as in the Church's worship around the throne of God. Drawing on imagery from the book of Revelation, Peterson thereby presents the liturgy as the privileged site of divine presence and of specifically ecclesial publicity. Because the martyrs have a central place in this worship, such worship becomes itself a witness against totalising political power. The liturgy can therefore never be simply the expression of religious subjectivity or of the Church's self-representation to itself. Rather, it is the site of convergence of heavenly society with the gathered earthly community. Being such, the liturgy, and supremely the Eucharist, founds a true, ecclesial publicity [*Öffentlichkeit*].

The importance that Peterson attaches to acclamation might appear to align him too closely with the Nazi apologist Carl Schmitt. Indeed, their diagnoses of the modern condition share many similarities. Nevertheless, Peterson refused to follow Schmitt's endorsement of the state's appropriation of liturgical forms like acclamation, proclamation and sacramental representation in order to validate and sacralize its own political order. Political theology was, for Peterson, based not on an apocalyptic earthly politics and its associated tyranny of immanence and metaphysics of power. Rather, political theology was founded on God's self-revelation in history. Jesus' confrontation with Pilate serves as an image of the justified calm refusal to accept the terms of earthly power politics.

The time between Pentecost and the return of Christ, in which the Church lives, is not, however, one of passive submission. Mielke asserts that 'diese Zeit ist Zeit des Mähtekampfes, der Konfrontation zwischen neuem und altem Äon, zwischen historischer Dialektik und deren eschatologischer Aufhebung, zwischen Christus und dem Antichrist' (p. 170; 'this time is a time of power struggles, of confrontation between a new and an old aeon, between historical dialectic and its eschatological suspension, between Christ and the Antichrist'). Further potent imagery from Revelation is deployed: the battle between the Archangel Michael and the dragon, corrupting Satanic power and the whore of Babylon intoxicating the whole world. The life of the Church is thereby lived agonally between the times in an apocalyptic historical era. By situating dogma in this context, Peterson opposes the refusal of dialectical theologians to locate it ecclesially in the encounter between God and humanity.

With the conviction of a convert, Peterson defends in strong terms the fundamental importance of Christ's real bodily presence in the eucharistic bread and wine as contesting pure materiality with christically-founded embodiment. More could be said about the potent nexus of martyrdom, Eucharist and Resurrection that this implies. The Eucharist was frequently celebrated on altar-tombs, suggesting a conjunction of the new life and bodily wholeness to which the martyrs are called with the eucharistic transformation, in which is enacted the raising of Christ himself following his Passion, death and repose in the tomb.

This study is an important contribution to the understanding of a figure on whom not much has been published, even in German. It will interest political theologians of a range of denominations, usefully relating key debates back to the national political and intellectual contexts in which they began, as well as redressing the tendency to focus on Protestants of the era. Furthermore, Mielke offers valuable pointers towards a politically-grounded liturgical theology that does not collapse into mere activism, capably summarizing and situating a suggestive model of how the Church might transform the public realm today.

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