

The Distinction between Law and Gospel in its Significance for Political Theology: Systematic Considerations

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Abstract

This paper explores the theological distinction between Law and Gospel and its critical relevance for Political Theology. In contemporary debates, religion's role in shaping morality and politics is increasingly contested—secularists often view faith-based ethics as irrational or even harmful, while theologians argue that secularism itself may function ideologically. Within this tension, the study aims to clarify the relationship between faith, morality, and political power through a systematic reappraisal of the Law-Gospel distinction. Drawing primarily from Lutheran theology and engaging with Catholic perspectives, the author outlines how the Law—seen as God's normative will—demands moral behavior and structures just political order, while the Gospel—God's unconditional grace—empowers believers to fulfill the Law through love and trust, overcoming fear and self-interest. This theological lens is then applied to evaluate secular and religious political ideologies, arguing that the Law-Gospel dynamic provides a critical and liberating framework for Political Theology. The results highlight how distinguishing without separating Law and Gospel fosters a prophetic theology that both grounds normative ethics and upholds the transformative power of grace. The study contributes to Political Theology by offering a model that avoids legalism and moralism, while remaining ethically rigorous and theologically grounded, capable of engaging both secular reasoning and Christian faith in public discourse.

Keywords:

law-Gospel distinction; political theology; secularism; morality; Christian ethics

INTRODUCTION

In this essay I am going to discuss the distinction between Law and Gospel in its significance for Political Theology. In the following, I understand by the term "Political Theology" a politically committed Christian theology that critically analyses the socio-cultural, historical, economic and religious context in which faith and Church are positioned. Political Theology reflects in the light of God's self-revelation – in the light of Jesus Christ – on political power and criticises all kinds of ideology and idolatry (Metz, 2023, p. 88-99).

Recent theological scholarship has intensely debated the relevance of traditional doctrinal distinctions—such as that between Law and Gospel—for modern political engagement. Metz (2023, p. 53) emphasized that a credible Political Theology must emerge from historical experience and suffering, rather than from abstract moral principles. In the same vein, Highfield (2023, p. 74) stressed that understanding God's authority in ethical matters is essential for maintaining human dignity amid ideological confusion. These contributions reveal a growing concern about how Christian theological frameworks can guide moral discourse in pluralistic and often secular societies. Meanwhile, Ebeling (2024, p. 89) underlined the necessity of reinterpreting Luther's Law-Gospel distinction to address not only personal salvation but also collective responsibility, including socio-political ethics.

Contemporary scholars have also sought to reconcile the Law-Gospel framework with philosophical critiques of religion. Habermas (2008, p. 109) argued for the continued significance of religious insights in public discourse, proposing a post-secular society where faith-based reasoning remains dialogue-worthy alongside secular rationality. Crockett (2021, p. 45) advanced this by suggesting that Political Theology must reclaim radical theological concepts to challenge systems of domination. Similarly, Finnis (2021, p. 167) proposed a natural law approach grounded in moral realism that resonates with theological traditions while remaining accessible in secular ethical debate. These scholarly perspectives form the groundwork upon which this essay builds its argument for the renewed relevance of the Law-Gospel distinction in Political Theology.

One of the most important problems of Political Theology is connected with an appropriate conception regarding the relationship between faith and morality, viz., politics. My central thesis is that the theological distinction between Law and Gospel is extraordinary helpful in order to clarify the relation between faith and morality, viz., politics. Hence, I contend that the Law-Gospel-distinction is highly significant for a proper Political Theology (as well as for theology in general). The following lines intend to explicate and substantiate this claim.

Firstly, I shall briefly describe the idea of political secularism. Secondly, I shall demonstrate how the Law-Gospel-distinction can clarify the relation between faith and morals. Thirdly, I shall illustrate some consequences for Political Theology. Fourthly, I shall end with a short conclusion.

RESEARCH METHODS

The research methodology employed in this essay is primarily a theological and philosophical exploration of the Law-Gospel distinction, rooted in the Protestant Christian tradition. The approach combines systematic theology with political theory, critically analyzing both classical and contemporary sources. The essay begins with a review of existing political theologies, such as those articulated by Metz (2023, p. 67), which highlight the need for an ethical framework that bridges religious doctrine and political practice. Additionally, it engages with secular critiques of religion's role in politics, as presented by Habermas (2008, p. 112), who argues for a rational critique of faith-based politics while acknowledging its continued relevance in public discourse.

The study uses comparative theology, particularly Luther's understanding of the Law-Gospel distinction, to examine its implications for Political Theology. This approach is enriched by Ebeling's (2024, p. 92) analysis of Luther's theological works, which emphasize the interrelationship between morality, politics, and faith. The essay also draws on Finnis' (2021, p. 172) natural law theory to bridge the gap between theological ethics and secular political systems. These methodologies provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the Law-Gospel distinction in both theological and political contexts, offering a critical yet constructive lens for Political Theology.

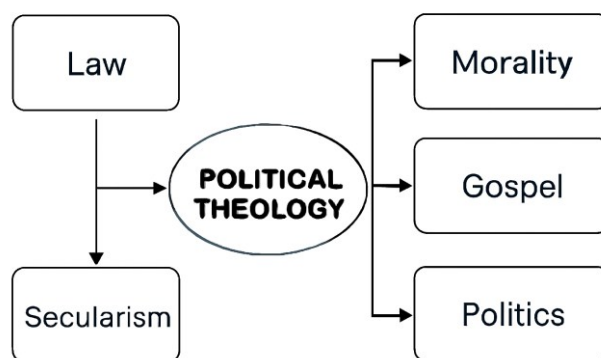


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework

RESULTS

Secular Morals, Secular Politics?

Many people believe that society needs religion due to its normative and regulatory power. Religion and faith provide the *normative sources* for morality and politics. Without religious traditions and religiously justified moral values we would have to face ethical egoism or even nihilism which involves extremely harmful consequences (Highfield,

2023, p. 64-74). Without religion and faith human beings turn into wild animals. However, this view has been criticized for a long time and gets currently criticized more and more.

For instance, secularist thinkers like the “New Atheists” claim that religious world views and especially faith in God are epistemically irrational and even harmful (Dawkins, 2009, p. 241-387). Hence, religiously justified morals and politics are also epistemically irrational and even harmful. Religion is seen as an ultimately anti-humanist phenomenon which endangers human flourishing, critical reason and progress of civilization. Therefore, it is necessary to minimize the political and cultural influence of religion. Public morality and politics have to be secular. Religion should be regarded as a totally private issue. This type of *secularism* stands in the tradition of the Enlightenment critique of religion and is not really new. However, contemporary secularism seems to become a very influential and sometimes fairly aggressive cultural factor.

In a similar way, liberals and critical rationalists defend the idea of an “*open society*” against all kinds of a magical, tribal, collectivist or totalitarian society (Popper, 2022). The idea of an “open society” is closely connected with critical-rationalist epistemology (fallibilism, realism, critical method) and postulates that political institutions, values and decisions have to be rationally criticisable and revisable. On this understanding, the leading German critical rationalist, Hans Albert, attacks Political Theology and the notion that morality and politics should be based on religion, viz., divine revelation. According to Albert, religiously justified politics unfolds like other totalitarian ideologies immunizing strategies against rational critique and is, therefore, not compatible with the idea of an open society. The same would be true for Political Theology and its secular offshoots. Albert distinguishes two basic variations: “conservative” Political Theology which legitimizes political domination by appealing to religious claims and “eschatological” Political Theology which endangers political domination by appealing to religious claims and longs for a “cleansing” catastrophe. For Albert, both variations are two sides of the same coin; and both variations are problematic because they involve political irrationalism (Albert, 2021, p. 189-196). Hence, we can find in critical rationalism too the plea for secular morals and secular politics.

In recent times, secularism itself has been criticized by theologians as some sort of ideology. Postsecularists claim that Western secularism has come to an end (Crockett,

2021, p. 160-161).¹ In fact, one can identify “pseudo-religious” elements in secularism and atheism (Deinhammer, 2012, 63-69). And it would be illusory to think that secular politics is not influenced by various forms of ideology or substitute religion. More balancing thinkers like Jürgen Habermas acknowledge both the importance of secular politics and the necessity of a constructive dialogue between politics and religion. According to Habermas, religious traditions provide significant contributions to our self-understanding which cannot be substituted by secular ethics so far (Habermas, 2008, p. 99-148).

Be that as it may, religion and politics can be a highly explosive mixture, radical Islamist theocracies and fundamentalist terrorism are the best examples in our days. Furthermore, it seems to be utopian to religiously justify morality and political values within religiously pluralist societies (Bible? Koran? Buddhist ethic of compassion?). In principal, political values and measures must be comprehensible for all citizens, regardless of whether they are religious or not.

But what does this requirement imply for the project of Political Theology? What is the appropriate theological relationship between theology and ethics, viz., politics? What is the theologically appropriate relationship between faith and morality? And what is the legitimate role of Christian Churches in modern societies?

Law and Gospel – Morality and Faith

The distinction between “Law” and “Gospel” can be seen as rooted especially in Pauline theology and is crucially relevant within the Protestant Christian tradition. For Catholics, however, the Law-Gospel-distinction seems to be sometimes less significant or even unintelligible. From my point of view, this matter is an example that Catholics can learn very important insights from their Protestant brothers and sisters. But what is the distinction between Law and Gospel about? In the following, I am going to confine myself more or less to the Lutheran approach (Ebeling, 2024, p. 118-119; Elert, 2023; Reisinger, 1997),² and I will also provide a Catholic interpretation of Law and Gospel.

¹ Clayton Crockett claims: ‘Today we can see a destruction or breakdown of any strict opposition between the religious and the secular, and this theoretical conclusion is coincident with a resurgence of religion in cultural, political, academic, and sociological terms. ... Postsecularism means that there is no way to ascertain a secure secularist and nonreligious viewpoint or to rigorously exclude religion from it.’

² Due to reasons of space, I will not explicitly address Luther’s regarding the “Two Kingdoms”. This doctrine is nothing but an elaboration of the Law-Gospel-distinction. From a rather evangelical point of

According to Luther, God's revelation happens through the *word*. Christian existence is based on the word of God. However, God's word is *twofold* (Ebeling, 2024, p. 118-119). It can be understood as Law or as Gospel, and both Law and Gospel can be found in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. The *Law* is God's word through which he obligates human beings to obey the commandments, for instance, the commandment not to adore anything in the world and to love one's neighbour as oneself (see Mt 22:37-40) or the commandment to care for social and political justice (see, e.g., Isa 1:17). The Law addresses the human *conscience* and requires to act in a morally good way, i.e. to be really humane. The Law expresses God's holy will, it is normative and binding, it has to be understood as an *absolute demand*. For Luther, the Law comprises two different purposes (Ebeling, 2024, p. 125-140). On the one hand, the Law is the *source of all morality*. It intends to foster peaceful and just social conditions of life. The Law shall help to establish a legitimate political and legal order (*usus civilis*). On the other hand, the Law is a preparation to the Gospel for it shows that human beings cannot fulfil the Law by their own efforts. The Law uncovers sin and accuses the sinner. Thus, it aims that the sinner is open to receive the Gospel (*usus spiritualis*). But what is the Gospel?

The *Gospel* is good news (*euangelion*) of Jesus Christ, God's word through which he reveals his unconditional *grace* and justifies the sinner. It is the preached message (*viva vox evangelii*) of Jesus, the Son of God, who reconciled the world with God through his cross and resurrection: 'All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation' (2 Cor 5:18-19). Unlike the Law, the Gospel is not a commandment or a moral norm which man has to fulfil but a promise and a gift full of grace. The Gospel is object of *faith*, only through faith one can embrace and attain justification, the right relationship with God. And the consequences of justification by faith in the Gospel are love and hope. According to Luther, the Gospel empowers human beings to acknowledge and fulfil the Law, i.e. to be really humane.

From Luther's point of view, the Law is God's word but it does not grant God's presence. God speaks through the Law as the *deus absconditus*, as the hidden and

view, Ernest C. Reisinger. Note, that one can find in the Lutheran tradition a *rigid distinction between Christian faith and religion*.

inaccessible God. Only the Gospel is God's word through which he makes himself present to man, through which he can be recognized as the *deus revelatus* (Ebeling, 2024, p. 226-241). Hence, the Gospel has to be understood as God's actual and ultimate word. For a proper theology it is crucial both not to confuse and not to separate Law and Gospel. One has to distinguish the Law from the Gospel and at the same time see the significance they have for each other.

Within the context of Catholicism, it is possible to translate the Law-Gospel-distinction in terms of the distinction between *nature* and *grace* (Knauer, 1991, p. 83-208). The created reality as such is something which addresses our conscience, and the content of the Law, the content of justified morality, can be known already by *natural reason*. The Catholic concept of *natural law* implies that one does not need supernatural faith and revelation in order to recognize the basic requirements of morality. Ethics is, therefore, a matter of argumentative reasoning. The only "content" of revelation is God's *self-communication* to the world against the background of God's radical transcendence: The whole world participates in the eternal love between God-Father and God-Son which is God-Holy Spirit. Nature is from the outset enclosed by grace. However, this becomes evident only through the incarnation of the Son in Jesus and his word. Thus, Christian faith is indeed based on the word through which we realise that we share the communion of Jesus and the Father, that God loves us with unconditional and eternal love. Only in this way communion with the absolute God is possible.

In this sense, faith in God means that one can live in an ultimate trust that is even stronger than death. Thus, faith overcomes the power of fear for oneself which is otherwise, in the final analysis, the cause of inhumanity and irrationality (see Heb. 2:15). Faith relieves from the power of fear for oneself and empowers human beings to act ethically well. *The Law, which can be recognized already by reason, is the point of contact for the Gospel, and the Gospel, which can be recognized only by faith in the Christian message, fulfils the Law.* What could this suggested relationship between Law, viz., morality and Gospel, viz., faith imply for Political Theology?

DISCUSSION

The Law-Gospel-Distinction and Political Theology

I contend that the Law-Gospel-Distinction is highly significant for a proper (Catholic) Political Theology. Political Theology has to enforce both Law and Gospel, and it has to critically distinguish between Law and Gospel.

One task of the Christian Churches is to convey (the content of) the Law in dialogue with all people. The Law unfolds political relevance because it provides the normative sources of a legitimate, just and life-serving political order with coercive power. The fact that human beings are, at least in principle, capable to recognize the Law establishes their human dignity. Since the Law is a matter of argumentative reasoning, Political Theology should try to develop a convincing and appropriate version of natural law thinking which can respond to the usual critique (Finnis, 2021; Deinhammer, 2005, p. 125-142). The required normative ethics has to be acceptable within a secular framework, thus, it should appeal to arguments that are comprehensible for all people, regardless of whether they are religious or not. From my point of view, there are several approaches which can be considered as promising attempts for this kind of *moral realism* (Wielenberg, 2009, p. 25).³ For instance, one could argue that the basic requirement of the Law is to acknowledge the reality in its particularity and autonomy, hence, in its finitude and preliminaryity. This means, that one must not absolutise anything in the world. Furthermore, it means that one should act in a sustainable and ultimately non-counterproductive way. The principle of proportionality could be seen as one basic ethical principle: It is problematic to cause or to allow harm without “proportionate reason” (Knauer, 1991, p. 91-113; Deinhammer, 2008, p. 148-188). Whatever one might think in this respect, Political Theology as the advocate of the Law has to face up to philosophical ethics and political theory as well as with political and religious ideologies which are politically relevant.

Political Theology is to support the Churches in their main task of preaching and conveying the Gospel to the whole world and in dialogue with all people. In this regard, one of the most important contributions of Political Theology is to clarify the relation

³ Several contemporary atheists argue in favour of moral realism (and against divine command theory) in order to show that the popular connotation of atheism as amoral is wrong. For instance, Eric J. Wielenberg state: ‘Ethical properties are *sui generis* properties that are not reducible to other kinds of properties, including natural properties that can be studied by the empirical sciences and supernatural properties involving God.’

between faith and morals, viz., politics and to explain the significance of faith in the Gospel for morality and politics. Related to a concrete political, cultural and socio-economic context, Political Theology has to show that without ultimate, viz., basic trust (which is realized in the Christian faith in the Gospel but can also occur as “anonymous faith”) a truly human life and coexistence is impossible, due to the fact that only ultimate trust can overcome the power of fear for oneself. The Gospel delivers out of the power of fear to love and hope, and this involves, of course, social and political consequences: The Gospel sets us free to fulfil the Law, i.e. to act reasonably in the broadest sense. Thus, one could say that good Political Theology is always *Liberation* Theology for it emphasizes the liberating power of the Gospel and the importance of the Law which manifests itself in the social and political realm as justice (Knauer, 2005, p. 37-59).

The Law-Gospel-distinction unfolds an eminently critical function. Hence, Political Theology that is guided by the Law-Gospel-distinction has to be *critical* as well. It has to criticise all sorts of misconceptions regarding the relationship between Law and Gospel which necessarily lead to corruption of both Law and Gospel. For instance, one can intermingle or confuse Law and Gospel. One can believe that the Law provides salvation. Political and pseudo-religious ideologies (e.g.: communism, capitalism, hyper-rationalism) are often structured in this way. On the other hand, one can assume that the Gospel is the Law or a new kind of law. In this case, the liberating power of the Gospel is unknown and Christianity turns into an irrational and moralizing ideology. But one can also separate Law and Gospel. Then it becomes likewise impossible to acknowledge the true purpose of both the Law and the Gospel. Proper Political Theology is to avoid both legalism and antinomianism.

Against all these distorted conceptions which are, according to Luther, unfortunately the normal case, the golden rule emerges from *Chalcedonian* thinking (Knauer, 1985, 1-15): One has to distinguish the Law and the Gospel, and at the same time correlate both to each other (“unconfused” and “unseparated”). This notion applies also to the proper relationship between world and God, nature and grace, reason and faith, Church and state, and so forth. In this sense, Political Theology that is guided by the Law-Gospel-distinction will be critical with regard to all sorts of idolatry. It will be an eminently *prophetic* theology, in theory and in practice (Metz, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This essay has demonstrated that the Protestant distinction between Law and Gospel provides a powerful theological lens to clarify the complex relationship between faith, morality, and politics. By distinguishing God's demand through the Law from His gracious promise through the Gospel, this framework avoids both legalism and moral relativism, allowing Political Theology to engage critically with contemporary socio-political realities. The Law offers a rational basis for justice and public ethics, while the Gospel empowers individuals and communities to transcend fear, enabling love, hope, and true human dignity. Therefore, the Law-Gospel-distinction is not only theologically sound but also politically relevant, offering both critique and constructive guidance. It remains a vital resource for developing a Political Theology that is both faithful and transformative.

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