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# When We Fail to Understand Ourselves

## *Reflections on Theology in the Crisis of Representation*

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### Introduction

The democratic experiment continues, but we have once again noticed it falter.[1] Among the attempts to understand these political upheavals, one approach has been to draw the contours of a certain "crisis of representation". The symptoms of such a crisis are manifold: low voter turnout,[2] a deterioration of party systems and affiliations,[3] a growing distrust of politicians and established media, new political cleavages,[4] as well as social and cultural turmoil. The result is a growth of populist parties and movements and nativist or nationalist ideologies.

We need a wide range of explanations to understand these varied phenomena in contemporary political life, and no single theory is likely to cover all

1. This is not, in general terms, a new phenomenon. See David Runciman, *How Democracy Ends*, New York 2018.

2. See Roberto Stefan Foa & Yascha Mounk, "The Danger of Deconsolidation: The Democratic Disconnect", *Journal of Democracy* 27:3 (2016), 5–17, https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0049.

3. See Russell J. Dalton & Martin P. Wattenberg (ed.), *Parties without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies*, Oxford 2002, https://doi.org/10.1093/0199253099.001.0001.

4. See Amory Gethin, Clara Martínez-Toledano & Thomas Piketty (eds.), *Political Cleavages and Social Inequalities: A Study of Fifty Democracies, 1948–2020*, Cambridge, MA 2021.

of them satisfyingly. What I would like to do is to approach the problems of contemporary Western democracies as symptoms of an underlying crisis of representation, acknowledging that such an approach will only be partial. To view them as symptoms of a crisis of representation is to think of them as indications that the gap between the people and representatives has become too large and that this condition is persistent.

My interest in the much-discussed relationship between this crisis of representation and the growth of populist parties or the resurgence of nationalist ideologies is primarily theological. The mobilization of Christian discourse by versions of nationalism, nativist populism, or champions of "Western civilization" puts new pressure on the question of how theologians should relate Christian resources for imagining communal identity to the general processes of representation in society at large. Thus, my intention in this article is neither to explain nor to propose a political solution, but to gain a theological perspective that might tell us something about how churches can respond to these crises and what resources theology may offer to the larger project of understanding our contemporary political crises. In this article, I will explore some possible answers to this question. In particular, I will suggest that we develop a theological analysis of the limits of representation, which will, among other things, involve attention to the times and places of *social unintelligibility*.

## Representation and Its Crisis

While some of our contemporary political questions concern the democratic nature of modern society, what is often at stake is, in fact, a question of political *representation*. As Mónica Brito Vieira and David Runciman have argued, "representation is the key concept for understanding the workings of modern, democratic states".[5] While modern societies are democratic, democratic power is always mediated through processes and institutions that put a wedge between the government and the represented people. Democracy was a political form associated with the ancient Greek city-state, and only arrived as a form of government in modern societies when other key developments had already occurred. Modern societies were organized around a distinction between state and society and between the sovereign power and the government. Representation depends on a division between state and society because the government, the holder of power, is never identical to the sovereign power as such. Modern societies became democratic *within* this structure of representation, which existed to *create*, *authorize*, and *restrict* political power. Hence, they combined a theory of popular sovereignty

5. Mónica Brito Vieira & David Runciman, *Representation*, Cambridge 2008, vii–viii.

with democratic rule (which is not a theory of sovereignty, but a theory of government). Given the division between the rulers and citizens, which is also reflective of the vast size and pluralism of modern societies, democracy cannot be realized in its classical, unmediated ideal, in which citizens directly and collectively rule themselves.[6] Instead, power must be represented by elected representatives who are granted regulated and limited powers.

In contemporary representative democracies, the leaders are supposed to represent the interest, wills, or identities of their people.[7] Democratic representation is an endless, though fluctuating affair. If the experienced distance between the representatives and the represented becomes too large, an electorate may react and reprimand or reject its leaders. Moreover, if this distance becomes more pervasive and becomes a general distrust of the system, a society approaches a crisis of representation. In the words of Paula Diehl:

> When, however, this exchange becomes interrupted or inconsistent, when the control mechanisms over the representatives no longer function, and these claim for themselves the power, and when the democratic configuration of political representation is no longer brought to expression, then there is a crisis of representation. Citizens turn away from politics, political institutions are no longer afforded trust, parties and politicians lose their trustworthiness, and the feeling reigns that political representatives have disconnected themselves from the people that they are obliged to represent.[8]

Some contemporary research into the resurgence of populist parties and movements and nationalist ideologies suggests that this has occured. Well-known surveys of the rise of European right-wing populist parties, such as research conducted by Cas Mudde, note a range of causes or demand-side dynamics, none of which are sufficient to explain their rise or to connect macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of explanation.[9] It is difficult to speak of

6. Brito Vieira & Runciman, *Representation*, 34. This is perhaps more an ideal than a reality, since Athenian democracy was never entirely "direct". Bernard Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government*, Cambridge 1997, 8–41, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511659935.

7. Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation*, Berkeley, CA 1967, 60–143.

8. Paula Diehl, "Demokratische Repräsentation und ihre Krise", *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 60:40–42 (2016), 12–17. My translation.

9. Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, Cambridge 2009, 201–231, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511492037. See also Kirk Hawkins, Madeleine Read & Teun Pauwels, "Populism and Its Causes", in Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Oxford 2017, 267–286, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198803560.013.13.

a “crisis”, Mudde notes, because the concept of crisis is unclear and highly contested. Like Mudde, Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser is hesitant about explanations of right-wing populism in terms of social, economic, or political crises, partly because such explanations assume a liberal devaluation of populism as an ailment within democracy.[10]

Ernesto Laclau's (1935–2014) theory of populism as a discursive logic takes it for granted that a “crisis of representation” is “at the root of any populist, anti-institutional outburst”.[11] His theory of populism is directly related to his concept of the political, and thus a philosophy of the conditions of political intelligibility. According to this theory, populist movements arise because people experience that their social demands have not been met. If this sense of frustration becomes sufficiently strong, it may threaten the hegemonic order of representation.

Benjamin Moffitt has sought to triangulate these positions, proposing that they fail to note that the contested nature of the crisis is precisely the point: the ascription of a crisis to society depends on a normative judgement about the original or proper functioning of that society, and such judgement is inherently political.[12] Therefore, the sense of a crisis is not merely something that breeds populism but something that many populist parties seek to sustain.

I will neither settle this debate nor make any strong claims about the empirical validity of a crisis of representation. But I will say that Moffitt implicitly points towards the fact that, insofar as the notion of crisis is relevant to the question of populism, it is because it operates on the level of the *symbolic*; it is weaponized and wielded in a contest about the fundamental symbols through which we interpret the society in which we live. And it is on this level that the notion of a crisis of *representation* becomes pertinent. A crisis of representation is a phenomenon that is fundamentally symbolic and thus susceptible to drastic change merely by a change of appearances of convictions.

For this reason, I would like to reflect on the crisis of representation as an occurrence on the level of the symbolic, granting that there is a range of other analyses (structural and economic) that are equally important. As Margaret Canovan (1939–2018) notes, populism arises from a symbolic ambiguity within modern representative democracies between its relatively

10. See Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, “The Ambivalence of Populism: Threat and Corrective for Democracy”, *Democratization* 19 (2012), 184–208, https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2011.572619.

11. Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, London 2005, 137.

12. See Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, Stanford, CA 2016.

thin processes of representation and its thick claim about the centrality of democratic rule.[13] This ambiguity may make some sense of the populist invocation of "the people" as well as nationalist ideologies. When the processes of symbolic negotiation that occur through regular politics fail to achieve consensus, there might arise such calls to reinstate "the people" – though often through a representative leader and sometimes through the appeal to an exclusionary identity. In order to understand as a symbolic issue what Diehl describes as a disconnect between the people and its representatives, we need to consider the problem of representation from a broader, philosophical point of view. While there is a much more detailed story to tell about the specifics of political representation, my concern is with how the concrete processes of representation are part of a more fundamental social symbolic structure.

A strand of French political thinkers, including Cornelius Castoriadis (1922–1997), Claude Lefort (1924–2010), Marcel Gauchet, and Pierre Rosanvallon, have argued that concrete political processes are part of a broader attempt in societies to determine and change the fundamental symbols, discourses, practices, and norms by which society makes sense of itself. For Castoriadis, "the institution of society" denotes the creation of the norms, categories, and symbolic arrangements that organize human life in general, as well as the more concrete and tangible sense of creating specific institutions.[14]

Claude Lefort was a colleague and collaborator with both Castoriadis and Gauchet at various times in his career. Like them, he was part of the French post-Marxist turn towards "the symbolic".[15] Every society, claims Lefort, depends on a specific *form*, a shaping (*mise en forme*) that provides the conditions for being, acting, and speaking in society as a whole. On the one hand, it sets the conditions for making sense (*mise en sense*), and on the other, it provides a stage (*mise en scene*), a field of representations, onto which sensible actions and statements are placed.[16] This constellation of conditions is what Lefort calls a *regime* and is what gives society a sense of unity, coherence, and endurance. A regime operates on the symbolic level of society, what he calls "the political" (*le politique*), since it concerns the institution of society as such – an institution that is always contestable to some extent.[17]

13. See Margaret Canovan, "Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy", *Political Studies* 47 (1999), 2–16, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.00184.

14. See Cornelius Castoriadis, "Institution of Society and Religion", *Thesis Eleven* 35 (1993), 1–17, https://doi.org/10.1177/072551369303500102.

15. See Warren Breckman, *Adventures of the Symbolic: Post-Marxism and Radical Democracy*, New York 2013.

16. See Claude Lefort, *Essais sur le politique, XIXe–XXe siècles*, Paris 2001, 282.

17. On the arrival of the distinction between politics and the political in continental

On a fundamental level, political life designates the field of activity in which human beings cooperate, negotiate, and struggle for competing visions and structures that define and sustain a communal essence. This activity is inherently a striving for *representation* (though not exclusively so), that is, a way of determining an intelligible context for identification, interaction, and change. In this sense, politics is a process that shapes and changes the fundamental conditions for making sense of whom we are and for determining the limits and possibilities of what can be done.

There is also an implicit assumption in Lefort's account that such contests for representation concern the community we call the nation: an often territorially circumscribed community in secular time, often unified around ideas of culture, ethnicity, language, or religion.[18] Thus, Lefort's theory intersects with the tradition from Benedict Anderson (1936–2015) – and Ernest Renan (1823–1892) before him – that thinks of nations as "imagined communities".[19]

If we take these general interpretations into account, we can approach the crisis of representation as a condition in which the fundamental premises of social action have become disputed. During such a crisis, social identities and actions cannot be understood as before because they lack the proper conditions (*mise en sense*) and an agreed-upon stage (*mise en scene*). By interpreting the crisis of representation in this way, I mean to present neither an adequate theory of populism nor an explanation for it, but rather to relate contested political issues and movements of our time to the symbolic questions at stake. And if we ask about a crisis of representation, we are asking about those times and places where people fail to make sense of themselves within the context of a broader social world.

## Theology and Social Intelligibility

The history of modern theology is intertwined with this broader social project of sense-making. This should not come as a surprise, since politics and theology in the West have had a close relationship in the past,[20] and not least since modern senses of "religion" and "society" as collective reifications developed together, so much so that it was possible for Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) to describe society as the real object of religion.[21] And

thought, see Oliver Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau*, Edinburgh 2008.

18. See Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism*, Cambridge 1997, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511612107.

19. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London 2006.

20. See Ragnar M. Bergem, *Politisk teologi*, Oslo 2019.

21. See John Bossy, "Some Elementary Forms of Durkheim", *Past & Present* 95 (1982), 3–18,

Christianity was fundamental in the development of modern nationalism, understood as a fundamental way of representing social coexistence in space and time.[22]

Since Christianity and religion played an often-crucial role in how European societies have represented themselves, theologians also sought to understand theology in relation to this role. Consequently, modern European theologians came to think about their work in relation to the social order as a search for intelligibility and transparency. For much of European theology from the eighteenth century onwards, the theological task turned into clarifying some of the fundamental symbols through which a society could become intelligible to itself. This holds particularly true for the hegemonic tradition of German Protestant theology.[23] It is also true of the French Roman Catholic tradition, which responded to and was informed by post-revolutionary debates within socialist, republican, and royalist circles about religion as the missing "positive" element of social cohesion.[24] Similar interests could be traced in Anglican theology as well.[25]

This interest in social intelligibility was directed internally towards the Church and externally towards the broader society, though the relationship between theology and communal representation was envisioned in various ways. The example of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's (1770–1831) philosophy is instructive, as would be Friederich Schleiermacher's (1768–1834) theology. For Hegel and the tradition after him, religion was an essential part of the intelligibility of society as a whole. Without the role of religion in determining the subjective dispositions of the people, there is no purpose, Hegel argued, for institutions such as public education, civil society, or the state. Objective freedom is worthless without *subjective* adherence to the ideal of freedom, and thus religion is the means by which the people

https://doi.org/10.1093/past/95.1.3; Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, New York 1995.

22. See Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood*.

23. See Gary J. Dorrien, *Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit: The Idealistic Logic of Modern Theology*, Malden, MA 2012, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444355918.

24. On this complex of problems in French culture, see Michael C. Behrent, "The Mystical Body of Society: Religion and Association in Nineteenth-Century French Political Thought", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 62 (2008), 219–243. Strong echoes of these concerns is readily available in nineteenth- and twentieth-century French theological debates about the mystical body. See overviews of some debates in J. Eileen Scully, "The Theology of the Mystical Body of Christ in French Language Theology 1930–1950: A Review and Assessment", *Irish Theological Quarterly* 58 (1992), 58–74, https://doi.org/10.1177/002114009205800105; Edward P. Hahnenberg, "The Mystical Body of Christ and Communion Ecclesiology: Historical Parallels", *Irish Theological Quarterly* 70 (2005), 3–30, https://doi.org/10.1177/002114000507000101.

25. See Stephen Spencer (ed.), *Theology Reforming Society: Revisiting Anglican Social Theology*, London 2017.

would come to believe in freedom.[26] Importantly, the essential "idea" of Christianity – subjectively adhered to in established churches – corresponded to the idea that underlaid modern social organizations. In other words: religion was, for Hegel, a conduit for social intelligibility. The Christian "universal" was practised, worshipped, and preached; thus it contributed to making sense of the social world in which people lived. It was these sorts of arguments that allowed some theologians to find a place for explicating the universal categories of the Christian communal vision.

At several points, some reacted against theology's trajectory, which risked collapsing into nothing but a supplier of inclusive symbols that supposedly aided us in representation and social integration. Karl Barth's (1886–1968) indictment of liberal theology was one such response.[27] Similar qualms were later expressed by "post-liberal" communitarians who reacted to Christianity becoming a naive puppet of secular society.[28] Theologians sought to shift the focal point of communal representation from society as such to the process of self-identification within a Christian community. The post-liberal ecclesiology of William T. Cavanaugh, for example, is strongly anti-nationalistic and evidently suspicious about the quasi-religious role of the modern state.[29] The triumphant vision of theology as a social science in Radical Orthodoxy, as espoused by John Milbank and others, depends on the argument that *any* "universal" or "neutral" theory of the social is impossible.[30] "Society" as an object of allegedly neutral description, is intrinsically aporetic, according to Milbank. In its place, he proposes a presentation of Christian *Sittlichkeit*, though at the cost of equivocating about the Church being a historical or ideal reality. In this manner, the Church appears to be a supplier of social unity and intelligibility that no other community can achieve, though Milbank has admitted that the Church has failed to live

26. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: 1. Introduction and The Concept of Religion*, London 1984, 458–459.

27. See, for example, his characterization of the project of synthesizing "Christ" and "society" in his 1919 Tambach lecture: "Es gibt allerdings auch hier die Möglichkeit, das alte Kleid mit losgerissenen Lappen vom neuen Kleid zu flicken, ich meine den Versuch, der weltlichen Gesellschaft eine kirchlichen Überbau oder Anbau anzugliedern und so nach dem alten Mißverständnis des Wortes Jesu dem Kaiser zu geben, was des Kaisers und Gott, was Gottes ist. [...] Bereits zeigen sich die Ansätze dazu auch auf protestantischem Gebiet: Laßt uns eine neue Kirche errichten mit demokratischen Allüren und sozialistischem Einschlag!" Karl Barth, "Der Christ in Der Gesellchaft", in Jürgen Moltmann (ed.), *Anfänge der Dialektischen Theologie: 1. Karl Barth, Heinrich Barth, Emil Brunner*, München 1962, 8.

28. See Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company: The Church as Polis*, Notre Dame, IN 2001; George A. Lindbeck, *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, London 2002.

29. See William T. Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church*, Grand Rapids, MI 2011.

30. See John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed., Oxford 2006.

up to this ideal.[31] Accordingly, Milbank's ecclesiology seems to push in two opposite but equally questionable directions: entertaining either the idea of a new Christendom, where the Church integrates with and consummates the representation of society (as Christiane Alpers has argued),[32] or an idea of the Church as an anarchic community without determinable place and time, being only "present intermittently"; what Gillian Rose (1947–1995) has termed a "holy middle".[33]

In very general terms, many theologians have found themselves between these two poles: that of treating Christian symbols and practice as necessary conditions for an accurate representation of society, or as an alternative *societas* or *polis* that should not concern itself with how broader society represents itself. Neither of these extremes is necessarily connected to a certain political persuasion. However, the recent mobilization of Christian discourse by versions of nationalism, nativist populism, and champions of "Western civilization" raises a question of how theologians ought to relate Christian resources for imagining communal identity to the general processes of representation in society at large. It demands, among other things, a consideration of what legitimate role social *unintelligibility* may play from the perspective of Christian political theology. There is clearly something to be said for the idea that an essential theological task is the explication of social intelligibility, of how human beings may relate and coexist in a peaceful manner that respects everyone's integrity, dignity, and liberty. At the same time, there is something to the worry that such a task may lead theology into becoming uncritical and overly preservative of the present self-understandings of whatever society it inhabits. There is also a correlative concern about the view of the Church or Christianity as an idealized substitute for whatever social unity and intelligibility that worldly society cannot achieve.

## Thinking Theologically during the Crisis of Representation

A critique that underscores the responsibility of Christian language and practices towards God is, I think, necessary if only to ensure the integrity of theological language.[34] However, we ought not to underscore the

31. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 11, 108, 382–383, 440–442.

32. See Christiane Alpers, *A Politics of Grace: Hope for Redemption in a Post-Christendom Context*, London 2018, 33–85.

33. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 440. See Rose's critique in Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society*, Oxford 1992, 277–295. For some theological implications of Rose's critiques of holy middles, see Rowan D. Williams, "Between Politics and Metaphysics: Reflections in the Wake of Gillian Rose", *Modern Theology* 11 (1995), 3–22, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0025.1995.tb00050.x.

34. See Rowan Williams, "Theological Integrity", *New Blackfriars* 72 (1991), 140–151, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1991.tb07155.x.

transcendent or "vertical" dimension of religious language without understanding its implications in the "horizontal" constitution of societies. That is why, I think, it is helpful to glance at the tradition most critical of the function of representation in modern society, namely the Marxist tradition. The Marxist critique of religion's role in society turns the Hegelian analysis on its head.[35] It accepts the claim that religion is a supplier of a range of fundamental social coordinates, but then it charges that these coordinates amount to a bourgeois ideology that justifies and veils social inequality by promising a freedom only finally gained in heaven. Religion, then, provides a mode of social intelligibility for its adherents at the price of sustaining a deeper confusion about the determinants of society. The existence of religion is a marker of a society that has failed to make sense of itself and, therefore, displaces its point of coherence to an otherworldly realm. Insofar as religion helps us represent ourselves, it also misrepresents us because it forecloses possibilities for change. Karl Marx (1818–1883) reminds us that making sense of oneself is not an unequivocal good, as those who have been told to remain in their deprived status can undoubtedly appreciate. Hence, the first lesson from this tradition is that *representation is never an unequivocal good*.

Though the Marxist critique might seem to limit possibilities for theological thinking, variations of this critique reverberated within theology in the latter half of the twentieth century. Liberation theology, for example, drew on Marxist themes as a fruitful starting point for theological reflection and action. It argued that the governing structures of representation structurally excluded those most vulnerable and cemented capitalist identities so that even Christians were induced to overlook the poor.[36] Liberation theology, like a range of other critical traditions of theological reflection, has therefore been able to establish a critical counterweight to a Christianity overly concerned with allying itself with hegemonic ideologies.

While the reference to the "poor" in liberation theology may converge with Marxist criticism of oppression, it also replaces with a symbolic reference what was, for Marx, a materialist basis. Thus, it is just one instance of a broader complex shift in critical thought after Marx that has some of its sources in nineteenth-century socialist traditions, but that, at least on

35. See, for example, Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question", in Joseph J. O'Malley (ed.), *Marx: Early Political Writings*, Cambridge 1994, 28–56, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139168007.006.

36. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, Maryknoll, NY 1988, 151. Enrique D. Dussel, *Beyond Philosophy: Ethics, History, Marxism, and Liberation Theology*, Lanham, MD 2003, 97. See also Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Truth Shall Make You Free: Confrontations*, Maryknoll, NY 1990. For a more radical appropriation of Marxist thought, see Leonardo Boff & Clodovis Boff, *Salvation and Liberation*, Maryknoll, NY 1984.

the European continent, received more support during the latter half of the twentieth century. In some of these traditions, the "social" was reconceived as a field of possible political action that was not entirely predetermined by material structures. As Warren Breckman has demonstrated, the post-Marxist turn among political philosophers after 1968 – which includes Castoriadis and Lefort, as well as postmodern theorists – drew on a tradition traceable to German Romanticism and to French socialists such as Pierre Leroux (1797–1871).[37] Common to this tradition is the recognition that a critique of representation cannot be accomplished through a scientific theory of materialistic conditions since it is impossible to formulate a theory that can prove its validity independently of a contingent symbolic context. Hence, for postmodern theorists like Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007), the failure of Marxism is not that it sought to critique representation, but that it thought it was possible to do so from a position shielded from the symbolic:

> It is no longer worthwhile to make a radical critique of the order of representation in the name of production and of its revolutionary formula. These two orders are inseparable and, paradoxical though it may seem, Marx did not subject the form production to a radical analysis any more than he did the form representation.[38]

Thus, the second lesson I would like to gather from these critical traditions: *it is impossible to analyze or critique the order of representation from a standpoint altogether outside that very order*. It follows that an analysis of the crisis of representation cannot escape the inherently contested symbolic realm either.

Given these lessons from critical traditions in the wake of Marx, how can we approach the crisis of representation on theological terms? I will offer only some reflections here by providing a few observations and drawing some possible consequences.

If the post-Marxist tradition is right about the symbolic constitution of society, theological symbols may equally help us understand the crisis of representation. This is not an argument for the *replacement* of "secular" with "religious" symbols for achieving more accurate representation, but quite the opposite: the claim that theological symbols may help us understand and negotiate the *limits* of representation. Much post-Marxist political thought is still indebted to certain Kantian presuppositions, though without trans-historical transcendental justification. For example,

37. See Breckman, *Adventures of the Symbolic*.

38. Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, St. Louis, MO 1975, 21.

Castoriadis and Lefort, and more recently Slavoj Žižek and Ernesto Laclau, tend to substitute the materialistic base with some version of a psychoanalytic claim about the symbolic field as haunted by an unrepresentable lack.[39] Such theories seem to me to fall into the temptation of asserting that *all* representations are faulty by default (and in the same manner) and, concomitantly, so succumbs to the desire to determine unequivocally the limit between representation and its other. These theories seek to submit the order of representation to at least *one* universal logic, namely that of its failure.[40]

If, however, the symbolic is unavoidable, theological symbols may help us approach the limits and failures of representation, not by univocally determining the limits between the knowable and the unknowable in Kantian fashion, but by negotiating human life in light of affairs that appear at once in and beyond the limits of human powers and cognition.[41] In particular, Christian symbols of creation and the Fall continue to hold relevance for our understanding of the problem of representation. In terms of creation, I believe that a proper account of created finitude must acknowledge the opacity of human existence – both on individual and social levels. Thus, while a structure of representation geared towards ultimate transparency may very well "work" for some time, a theological critique of such a structure ought to point out the problematic consequences of a search for what is, in fact, a God's eye point of view.[42] To be sure, Christian practice and discourse do and ought to promote a horizon of intelligibility – both in terms of Christianity's theology of creation and its doctrines of ecclesiology and salvation. For what is the Gospel if not also a promise of a community, a mode of living in a context in which social actions *make sense*? However, what I take to be a significant insight from a long tradition of theological reflection is that this horizon of significance, this open welcome into the community of divine life, ought not to be understood as a call to enter a univocally defined "frame" on which social life becomes meaningful. Whatever we mean by living the life together in Christ, we are not speaking of entering a "stage", the backdrop of which is the Christian truth. One could

39. See Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, London 2012; Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 110.

40. See an analysis of some of these tendencies, and how theology might respond, in Ragnar M. Bergem, "On the Persistence of the Genealogical in Contemporary Theology", *Modern Theology* 33 (2017), 434–452, https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12337.

41. See one exposition of this way of thinking theologically in Ragnar M. Bergem, "Transgressions: Erich Przywara, G.W.F. Hegel, and the Principle of Non-Contradiction", *Forum Philosophicum* 21 (2016), 11–27, https://doi.org/10.5840/forphil20162112.

42. See Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language*, London 2014.

argue that if theologians are overly concerned with representation, they will always risk erecting an idol, in Jean-Luc Marion's sense of the term.[43]

Similarly, an account of sin can contribute to our understanding of how a particular political regime is inevitably shot through with practices of deception. However, the theologico-political history of the West complicates this insight, especially when it pertains to the question of political representation. The Augustinian tradition of political thought has claimed that politics is, to some extent, a response to the sinfulness of human beings.[44] Similarly, a strand of nominalism employed the doctrine of sin to emphasize the limits of human cognition.[45] The consequence was not necessarily the erasure of political ambition but a way of approaching politics that was highly suspicious about representing and safely enacting human beings' "real" will or interest. Given the unknowability of individual consciousness and the viciousness of human nature, a number of rules had to be deduced to determine a safe basis on which people may be treated in a public context.[46] Such political developments occurred in the same period when religiosity was associated with the interior, which also meant that, in this context, sin was chiefly considered an individual affair. The positive upshot of this line of thinking is that it puts a check on attempts to actualize utopian visions that may eventually turn politics into a tool of repression. However, the negative consequence is that one may fail to reflect on the communal and structural dimensions of sin. The most potent version of this "liberal" tradition seeks to deal with sin by means of rules, yet it seems unwarranted that any human construction can shield itself from sin in this manner.

In Christian traditions, symbols such as creation and sin gain meaning through concrete spiritual practices that contribute to sense-making and destabilization. To practice Christianity is inevitably to engage with a set of very particular symbols and, explicitly or implicitly, to occupy oneself with a specific communal vision. Nevertheless, it is not a practice in which transparency necessarily precedes intelligibility or where the Christian symbols of community ought to function as a reference for the univocal determination of social actions. Thus – to touch on the question of nationalism – when Benedict Anderson repeats Hegel's claim that reading newspapers is a modern nationalistic substitute for the morning prayer, we should take

43. See Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*, 2nd ed., Chicago 2012.

44. Robert A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine*, Cambridge 1988, xiii–xx.

45. See Peter Harrison, *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science*, Cambridge 2007, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511487750.

46. See Ian Hunter, *Rival Enlightenments: Civil and Metaphysical Philosophy in Early Modern Germany*, Cambridge 2001, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511490583.

a moment's pause.[47] On theological grounds, we may indeed say that the practice of prayer sustains a sense of belonging, of temporal and trans-spatial co-existence, and we may, in that sense, compare it to the nationalist imagination. Yet, prayer is also a mode of *destabilization*, a place in which the believer opens herself up to be changed – both by God and her fellow believers. As Sarah Coakley has argued, prayer may put into question precisely the "horizons" of representation to which we have committed.[48] Hence, ultimately, a Christian is, as Barth once noted, one who is "strange to himself and his fellows".[49]

Alongside such symbols and practices that destabilize our view of representation, the Christian tradition has often given voice to a particular view of the human community that has significance for our view of representation. The idea that human sociality in fallen time is always deficient is linked to the idea that true human sociality is at once granted and revealed in and through God's actions for the world. This is the idea that salvation is first and foremost to share in a communal relationship to which we previously did not have access. In the words of the Anglican historian and priest John Neville Figgis (1866–1919): "'The Fellowship of the Mystery'; that is St. Paul's account of Churchmanship. It is a fellowship, a common life; and what is shared is a mystery, something that was once obscure, but is now in the process of being made known."[50]

In this particular sense, a certain interpretation of Marxism's eschatology resonates with Christian eschatologies: that true sociality is something to come, both ontologically and epistemologically. In terms of representation, then, true sociality can only be formulated on account of conditions that are not directly accessible or verifiable at present. One can read Christian practices of destabilization in this light, namely as attuning human beings to opening themselves up to relationships before and without any determinate regime of representation, that is, without necessarily relying on a preordained scheme of identification. What one could call the overdeterminacy of community or the priority of the communal over the representable is expressed "inwardly" and "outwardly": inwardly, because the Christian "identity" is precisely not an identity, but rather a kind of relationship to every particular identity, as Kathryn Tanner has suggested, and which Giorgio Agamben has so suggestively explored in philosophical terms.[51]

47. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 25.

48. See Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay "On the Trinity"*, Cambridge 2013, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139048958.

49. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: 4.4. The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, Edinburgh 1969, 3.

50. John Neville Figgis, *The Fellowship of the Mystery*, London 1914, 3.

51. See Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*, Minneapolis, MN

Similarly, the "outward" relationship is captured by Christian conceptions of love (*agape*) that underscore that the love of one's neighbour must transgress any particular representation that might restrict one's conceptions of who that neighbour might be. One consequence of the Gospel seems to be that Christians must wager that intelligible social interaction is possible even in those places where we have no stable point of reference. In this sense, the Christian faith implies that communal life is *more* fundamental than any regime of representation, which challenges the assumption that we can only safely engage with each other if first we recognize everybody as subjects, as formally identical bearers of rights within a determinable space.

## Communal Life and Eschatological Reserve

Given these theological observations, I would like to end this article by proposing four tentative lessons we might draw from this attempt to situate the theological task in relation to the question of representation.

First, Christian symbols and practices of destabilization ought to orient theological reflection towards the unrepresented. Responding theologically to the crisis of representation may require a perilous search for and cooperation with modes of living among people that are not "adequately" represented, being open to the fact that there could be ways of acting and thinking that are valuable precisely because they *do not fit* into the hegemonic regime of representation. Social unintelligibility ought not, therefore, to be deemed a problem or danger as such. However, this will also involve a risk of becoming unwitting partners with reactionary forces that want to reshape society to become a place where only their sense of identity is acceptable.[52] Thus, facing this risk also means detecting where a sense of dislocation threatens to become a starting point for a project of domination and recapture.

Second, as implied by the previous point, a Christian political theology of the crisis of representation will do well to attend to the "informal" or "communal" dimensions of politics. This is an insight that Luke Bretherton has developed extensively in his recent works on political theology.[53] By following various Christian socialist and associationist traditions, he seeks to decentre the state as the focal point of politics without turning the Church

1997. See also Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, Stanford, CA 2005.

52. See Hannah M. Strømmen & Ulrich Schmiedel, *The Claim to Christianity: Responding to the Far Right*, London 2020.

53. See Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics: The Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness*, Chichester 2010; Luke Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy: Faith, Citizenship, and the Politics of a Common Life*, Cambridge 2014, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139343442; Luke Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life: Political Theology and the Case for Democracy*, Grand Rapids, MI 2019.

into a *polis* obliged to carry the burden of true representation for all. For that reason, he is able, for example, to accommodate a positive role for populist movements, since the "real question is not whether it is possible to banish populism from democratic politics, but what kind of populism to foster alongside structures of representation".[54] The key political term for Bretherton is *common life*, something that may be sustained on various levels and ultimately arises out of bottom-up processes of association. Hence:

> The people as a whole is made up of associations coming into relationship with each other, and it is the negotiation of the different interests and visions of the good between associations that forms a common life – this common life being what constitutes the people qua people.[55]

The benefit of this view is that it refuses a reduction of representation to a single hegemonic process and shifts the emphasis from the state as the point of convergence of a static "people" to a multifaceted politics of the *social*. Hence, it decentres processes of representation and acknowledges the priority of the communal. At the same time, this revision faces the difficulty of reconciling the "informal" and "formal" bases of politics – that is, the relationship between the social and communal basis of politics and the formal structures of democratic representation and government through the state. Hence, there are dangers to idealizing the social.

On the one hand, there is the problem – not least in Scandinavian countries – that "society" is so thoroughly molded by the state and market that it is difficult to recognize "the social" other than through those lenses. In a crisis of representation, non-dominant modes of living, with their local practices and traditions, may make their mark, and such modes of living may become the starting point for a renewal of community and politics. But quite often, they do not; instead, we only see the shadow of state and market – minor protests made on behalf of those who are powerless to change their fundamental conditions. So there remains a real question whether positing "the social" as a basis for political action escapes the dialectics of state and market.

On the other hand, as Oliver O'Donovan has argued, there is a danger that the *polis*, in this vision, comes to stand for "the ideal pre-lapsarian community, experienced exclusively as free relationality and cooperation".[56] I am unsure whether O'Donovan's charge is entirely fair to Bretherton's

54. Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life*, 424.

55. Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life*, 427.

56. Oliver O'Donovan, "The Professional Politician and the Activist", *Studies in Christian Ethics* 33 (2020), 248, https://doi.org/10.1177/0953946819897591.

political theology. However, it certainly points to a question that should be explored further, namely that of the relationship between dominant modes of representation through the state and whatever communal life transcends the former. This issue is raised, in other terms, in debates about liberation theology after "the end of history".[57]

Third, more than the Church being a *solution* to the crisis of representation, it might be that the crisis is first and foremost an opportunity for the Church to relearn something about its language and processes of representation. One of the things it may learn is to operate in this space between hegemonic social worlds and their deterioration. To operate wisely in this space includes, among other things, an eschatological orientation that inflects the status of our symbols by which we make sense of ourselves. There is a peculiarity to "the Christian universal" (if one may use such words): At that point where all the lines converge, where these symbols of the divine community create a unifying context in which everyone gains their rightful place, precisely *there* is the place where the symbolic opens *beyond* itself. The completion of the universal is its opening.

Hence, the Church's fickle nature as a political entity: On the one hand, it is a public place for gathering and sharing life across every division. On the other, it constitutes itself as a society through an act that points beyond itself – not simply to God "up there", but to the Kingdom, the unity of all human beings with each other and with creation. What is enacted in the eucharist, for example, is undoubtedly a *representation* and a realization of community. Nevertheless, insofar as the eucharist stages social unity, it already points away from itself – ultimately towards all humankind. Thus, whatever "transparency" we may enact in a Christian community must constantly be challenged by the destabilizing eschatological status of Christian symbols and practice.

Different churches must enact such practices and symbolic processes in highly contextual settings, and there is no *single* practical implication to be drawn from these theological reflections. But for the majority churches of the Scandinavian countries, these questions of representation are particularly fraught because of their deep symbolic entanglement with statehood and nationhood. For such churches, I believe that the task in an increasingly multicultural society must be to critically question how ecclesial modes of operation are governed by an implicit concern to represent the national social whole. My worry with such a concern is that it may paradoxically

57. See Daniel M. Bell, *Liberation Theology after the End of History: The Refusal to Cease Suffering*, London 2001; Ivan Petrella, *The Future of Liberation Theology: An Argument and Manifesto*, Aldershot 2004.

curtail the proper openness that follows from the eschatological status of Christian practices.

Finally, I must note that this eschatological character enables us to think theologically *outside* the Church, as well. The Church exists to articulate a difference, a different way of being in the world, and imitates, in that sense, a different *city*. Yet, the difference it articulates is ultimately the difference of the world as changed through Christ, and thus, as Herbert McCabe (1926–2001) once wrote, the Church exists "to show the world to itself".[58] We must retain the analogy of Church and society, but also some of the dialectics between them. In that sense, theological reflection may contribute, too, as peoples and groups beyond the ecclesial context seek new sources of intelligibility. However, the offer that theology may present to such people should not be a promise of a new context involving complete transparency, lest we betray the eschatological mode of faith. ▲

**SUMMARY**

The mobilization of Christian discourse by versions of nationalism, nativist populism, and champions of "Western civilization" puts new pressure on the question of how theologians should relate Christian resources for imagining communal identity to the general processes of representation in society at large. In this article, I analyze the contemporary crisis of representation as a problem on the symbolic level of societies: as a crisis of social intelligibility. I do so in order to develop a theological perspective on how churches can respond to these crises and what resources theology may offer to the larger project of understanding our contemporary political crises. In particular, I suggest that we develop a theological analysis of the limits of representation, which will, among other things, involve attention to the times and places of social unintelligibility.

58. Herbert McCabe, *Law, Love and Language*, London 2013, 142, https://doi.org/10.5040/9781472965943.