Stellenbosch Theological Journal 2024, Vol 10, No 1, 6–19
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.2024.v10n1.20
Online ISSN 2413-9467 | Print ISSN 2413-9459

Sovereignty – of God, the nation, the people? Distinction and ambiguity[1]

Rudolf von Sinner
Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Paraná, Brazil
Stellenbosch University, South Africa
rudolf.sinner@pucpr.br

Abstract

Starting with an analysis of recent examples of Christian exponents trying to influence government in South Africa and Brazil, the article recalls the confessional declarations of Barmen, Belhar, and against the *russkii mir,* advocating a sovereign God against a totalitarian regime. While this shows efficiency in specific historical circumstances, it is insufficient in a secular, religiously diverse environment. God's sovereignty is not only questioning human sovereignty but tempers the concept itself. Rather than an oppressive "monotheism of truth", it is a "monotheism of loyalty" (Jan Assmann) in God's covenant with the people that presupposes their consent and the giving of the law. "The people" are, however, a precarious category and reality, given the ambiguity of good and evil as present in the world, which does not leave Christian communities untouched. This should produce a humbler approach that seeks to formulate a new, relational and dynamic concept of God's sovereignty that has its bearing on people's sovereignty as they are bound together in a covenantal relationship governed by the law.

Keywords

sovereignty; the people; monotheism; Brazil; South Africa

1 This article was elaborated during a research leave at Stellenbosch University, conceded by the Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Paraná at Curitiba, Brazil, and could count on support from the South African National Research Foundation (NRF) - unique grant number 145507, reference RA201007566042 - and a research productivity scholarship from the Brazilian Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) on "Sovereignty: a philosophical-theological dialogue in the perspective of a Lutheran public theology", process nr. 311892/2022-1.

1. Introduction

This is an interesting, and I hope auspicious, time for South Africa, with bearings not only for the country but also for its place in the world community. There are enormous challenges to be met by a new parliament in the new configuration of a Government of National Unity (GNU). As President Ramaphosa affirmed, "the people have spoken" and, in this sense, exercised their sovereignty in the nation. It is my hope, wish and prayer that the result of this will benefit the country.

What does God have to do with this, or with any democratic election, for that matter? Does God align with that nation and with the people, or not? Is God's sovereignty "totally other" or the reason for or even divinization for this-worldly sovereignties? Or anything in-between, potentially ambiguous? Let us test this initially with a very concrete case of the invocation of God at the end of the 1st sitting of the 7th democratic parliament, which ended with prayers from religious leaders. As they were named by the speaker of the house, National Assembly member Vuyolwethy Zungula, president of the African Transformation Movement (ATM), complained about the absence of African Indigenous Spirituality in this moment of prayer.[2]

First, then, spoke and prayed Bishop Templeton Mbekwa, apparently a chaplain to the ANC in the Western Cape[3] and head of the African Religious and Traditional Leaders' Council:

> "The people of South Africa have spoken, the political party has spoken, and now it is time for God to bless the 1st sitting of this 7th parliament. From the book of Psalms 91 verse number 15: 'You will call on me and I will answer you, I will be with you in trouble, and I

2 All quotes of the Parliament sitting are from the following recording. https://www.facebook.com/watch/ live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=1692071774956423, from 3hrs 40 minutes [Accessed: 18 June 2024].

3 Bishop Mbekwa heads the African Religious and Traditional Leaders Council (ARTLC) and supports the ANC and some of its exponents (e.g. https://www.polity.org.za/article/dlamini-zumas-presidency-campaign-gets-backing-from-cape-town-religious-group-2022-09-15 [Accessed: 18 June, 2024]. https://www.facebook.com/SABCNewsWesternCape/photos/a.879960432056342/1409512569101123/? type=3 The chat speaks about Bishop Mbekwa as linked to the "ANC chaplaincy in the Western Cape" [Accessed: 18 June 2024.] The LinkedIn profile indicates the "IMA" – International Minister's Association: https://www.linkedin.com/in/templeton-mbekwa-33b67010b/?originalSubdomain=za [Accessed: 18 June 2024].

> will deliver and honour you.' God is talking and blessing this house. This is the homework of this house for the next five years: to call upon God. In times of trouble, he will answer. God is depending on every political party that is represented in South Africa to call upon His name, and He wants to honour South Africa. Can we stand and pray together in the name of Jesus: Heavenly Father, once again we come before your throne, we acknowledge your sovereignty. […] Father, God, you bless this house … let this house be the house of solutions. We bless every individual under this roof right now. We cancel every pathetic, false prophet that has prophesized against this house, that has prophesized against South Africa. […] I sprinkle the blood of Jesus upon every individual from the hair of their head to the sole of their feet. I cut every plan and scheme of the enemy against the people of South Africa; we reverse it right now. In the name of Jesus bless you, almighty God, in Jesus' name, amen."

One could fill a whole article with this prayer only and its significance – who are the false prophets mentioned, for instance, and what is the theology behind it – but more research and contextualization would have to be done. For Brazilian context-attuned ears, the type of sovereignty of God mentioned by Bishop Mbekwa sounds like a theocratic idea within a theology of dominion.[4] It seems to charge politics with religious energy, and with a very specific religious energy at that if everyone's homework is to call upon God – God the Father of Jesus Christ. This appears to call into question the very idea of a pluralist, secular state. As I shall try to show, it also contradicts the very idea of God's sovereignty. This first prayer was the clearest prayer act in the house, given that most people would stand, mostly bow their heads and fold their hands. They would sit for what followed. A Hindu prayer by Mr Kirti Pandya, partly sung in Sanskrit, and partly read in English translation, followed, contemplating namely peace and harmony for South Africa and the entire world.[5] Third in line, Rev. Whiteman prayed:

---

4 See Ice 2009, s.p. [p. 1]: advocates of Dominion Theology "believe that dominion is to be taken by Christians (not immediately by Christ, but mediately through believers) over all mankind before Christ physically returns to planet earth."

5 The Jewish representative had to leave for the Shabbat celebration and could not wait for the closing after midnight. I would like to thank the Venerable Fr. Rodney Whiteman,

> "We call upon you Creator Divine, Creator of our universe and Divine Parent of all nations, to look upon our nation and our leaders as we enter the 7th Democratic era and embark on the next chapter of our journey as a nation.
>
> "We look back over the 30 years of our Democracy and celebrate all the good achieved. May we also learn from our mistakes, for many of our people still live in impoverished circumstances. Crime and corruption go unpunished. Sometimes there is a lack of political will for meaningful transformation. Many of our youth, especially the unemployed, feel a sense of hopelessness. Forgive us for our silences, our unwillingness to listen and to change for the good, and unwillingness to receive the challenge of accountability.
>
> "We call on you God Creator to open the minds and hearts of those who will govern us and will give us credible leadership on all levels of our national and provincial life. May they remember the calls for justice, equity, nation-building, economic justice and growth, equal opportunity, freedom from poverty and crime, and the benefits of proper housing, education and health for all.
>
> "Open their ears and hearts to listen to the cries of all living on the margins, disempowered, and respond with sincere servant-leadership, respect, and compassion.
>
> "Deliver the chambers of governance from siloed thinking and inertia."

The prayer goes on for quite a while still. It reads more as an exhortation than a prayer, giving a critical account of what has happened, where the country is and where it should go, calling for policies in view of social justice. It calls on God, but effectively calls the human leaders to accountability, namely the members of parliament, but also all citizens. The position of the religious leader in this case is not linked up with parliament or the government, it is taking the position of a sentinel and is representing the people, voicing critique and hope in a liturgical way before God.

chairman of the Western Cape Provincial Council of Churches, which represents 39 member churches and the civil organizations, to have provided me with information about the prayers. I also thank Rev. Edwin Arrison for mediating the contact.

"Homework" here presents itself quite differently from the earlier prayer. Rev. Whiteman invokes the creator-God, "parent of all nations", in an intentionally inclusive image of God. No idea of power or direct action of God is mentioned. Rather than "thank you", the speaker of the house said "amen" after the prayer. The exhortation was heard and found pertinent, at least by Madam Speaker who explicitly acknowledged it.

We can see here the complex relationship between God, the nation, and the people. There can be mutual alignments and oppositions, exacerbations and relativizations, inclusivity or exclusivity. *God* as sovereign can prevent the exacerbation of human sovereignty, but God's sovereignty can also become exclusive and promote authoritarianism. It has been very important in Barmen (1934), in Belhar (1982/86), and in the Declaration of the Russian World (*Russkii mir*) in 2022. But is it helpful in pluralist, democratic situations? The nation as sovereign can be an important way of asserting identity, cohesion, and inclusivity – the belonging together of those who are part of the nation and are called together to build it. However, it can also become extremely exclusive as to who belongs and who does not, can close borders and renounce international law and responsibilities. We are seeing it in Russia's invasion of Ukraine and in Israel's destruction of Gaza, to name but two prominent and contemporary examples. The *people* as sovereign are the presupposition of any democracy. As Abraham Lincoln famously said in his 1863 Gettysburg address: it is the government of the people, by the people, and for the people. This is important in recognizing that all people are fit to participate in deciding their fate. While the will of "the people" in its generality is very tricky and after all a hypothetical category, there are means of concrete manifestation. This does not only cover the vote but also continuous ways of participation in governance and critical accompaniment through civil society, including religious communities. However, there are the dangers of populism, when there is a direct link between a leader and people who despise the law and institutions and mark clear boundaries as to who is in and who is out. The ambiguity of the category "volk" is also still fresh in memory, when, rather than a social or political category, it becomes ethnically defined and leads to exclusive nationalism.

What I want to argue in what follows is that all these categories are necessary and to some degree helpful, but also deeply ambiguous and

precarious. The relationship between God, the nation, and the people, and their specific ways of constituting sovereignty is a dynamic relationship which works best, I contend, when they both inform each other and do not easily conform.

2. God's sovereignty and human sovereignty

The position indicated by Bishop Templeton seems to resonate with what is happening with certain Christian groups in many countries, not least in Brazil, where the whole idea is that Christians must take over the government for God to reign. As far back as 1988, when the new Constitution was promulgated and Pentecostals started to become active, indeed very active in politics, the editor-in-chief of the Assemblies of God's monthly newspaper, Pastor Nemuel Kessler, acknowledged several aspects dear to Pentecostals were duly contemplated, like restrictions over against homosexuality and abortion. These aspects still today form a central part of their moralism, or "customs' agenda" (*pauta dos costumes*). While quite satisfied with these achievements that also included the maintenance of the invocation of God in the constitution's preamble, for which the voice of *evangélicos*[6] was important, Kessler affirmed:

> "Now, we shall wait for the country to come to order, overcoming this difficult phase of democratic transition, and that the socio-economic problems will be corrected, so that the great mass of the Brazilian population that is in need may have resources for a more dignified life, without the sufferings caused by misery. […]
>
> "May our public men, after this phase, understand that Brazil can only effectively improve when it recognizes the sovereignty of God and submits to its care, in this way fulfilling what the text says: 'Happy is the nation whose God is the LORD' [Psalm 33:12] Our *evangélico* brothers that occupy public office must continue to contribute towards this end, so that it may become a reality in our fatherland, and that they do not lose sight of Jesus' teaching, so

6 Rather than translating as evangelicals, which I consider unfitting for the enormous diversity of all these Christian persons and groups that are not Catholic or Orthodox, I maintain the common Brazilian term *evangélicos*.

> necessary for today: 'You are the light of the world and the salt of the earth' [cf. Mt 5:13–14]." (Kessler 1998:2; Maria 2024:46; translation mine).

Such a position taken a good generation ago became much bolder when Jair Messias Bolsonaro was, with great help from the *evangélico* fold elected as president of the Federal Republic of Brazil in 2018. He was anointed almost a year after his election by supreme bishop Edir Macedo at the Universal Church of God's Kingdom's "Temple of Solomon" in São Paulo. In his prayer, Macedo said, among others:

> "In the name of the Lord Jesus, Father, the Lord has given me authority to cast out demons, to heal the sick, to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth, but I use all this authority to bless this man and ask the Lord to come, Holy Spirit, upon him, to give him wisdom, the wisdom that comes from You, from above, from the throne of the Most High, so that from now on this country, my God, will be transformed, he will have wisdom, intelligence, courage, health, strength, vigour, to make this country a new Brazil …" (as quoted in and translated from Bolsonaro's official Facebook page by von Sinner 2022:134).

The style and content of this ritual and prayer resemble the anointing of kings by bishops as occurred for centuries in Catholic and Anglican countries. It so happens that Edir Macedo is not the primate bishop of all Brazil, nor all *evangélicos*, much less of the Catholics, and he does not have the authority to anoint a president of the Republic to his service, neither by representation, let alone by legal precept. And neither is the President of the Brazilian Republic constitutionally a monarch "by the grace of God", but elected by the sovereign people, to whom he must answer within the parameters of the constitution and the legislation deriving therefrom. Beyond these more formal and legal aspects, one could ask: was Bolsonaro worthy of such adoration? Should Christians not always maintain a secure distance from any government, as was more common in the previous decades? Do they not owe loyalty only to their Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, rejecting, as did the Barmen Theological Declaration 90 years ago, "the false doctrine, as though there were areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords"? (PCUSA 2016).

This affirmation of God's sovereignty against human sovereignty is still important as a bulwark against authoritarian and totalitarian political systems, as John de Gruchy (1995:257) wrote thirty years ago, at the time of the first democratic elections in South Africa: "Sovereignty is not only a royal metaphor which separates God from the world, thereby legitimating hierarchy and paving the way for a theocratic-style tyranny; it is also a prophetic metaphor which, when applied to God, de-absolutizes and relativizes all other claimants to absolute power".

This also applies to a government, nation or people that claims to be "Christian". Any claim to sovereignty, De Gruchy contends, must be measured against its promoting – or restricting – of freedom and community, which is precisely theologically grounded in a Trinitarian understanding of God's sovereignty. Such prophetic opposition to God's and human sovereignty had a bearing on especially two other confessions, the Belhar Confession and the Declaration on the Russian World (*russkii mir*).

However, today we are in a situation where we might have to not only depotentialize the worldly powers by calling the church to be loyal to the only true sovereign, as Karl Barth would have it, but also the "godly" powers wielded by some of those who say they represent the God of Jesus Christ (cf. on this also Klein 2016). Not only can the state co-opt the church, but the church can also co-opt the state for its purposes and convictions. Dynamics are often intertwined and raise the question as to both God's and the nation's sovereignty in this equation.

Such changes in Christian participation in political life that shift from participation and contribution to imposition and seeking power, be it in government or civil society, have a bearing on democracy. An analysis from the perspective of public theology seeks to establish the place and role of churches and other religious communities in the public sphere, both descriptively and normatively. It tries to do so both from the perspective of the secular, religiously plural state that must guarantee equal rights to all religions, and from the perspective of the respective religious tradition (see von Sinner 2021). Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously said: "Only he who cries out for the Jews may sing Gregorian chants" (quoted by Bethge 2005:506; translation mine), which means, adapted to our theme here: whosoever

seeks to practice his or her religion has to speak out for the victims in other religions. Analogously, those who are all too anxious to look for their place under the state's sun and make sure they get their due share must also claim that possibility for other religions. They cannot claim for themselves what they deny others. Not only because the secular state asks them to do so for the sake of peace and meaningful conviviality, but because they have resources in themselves that teach them both to be missionary and to be tolerant, or rather, respectful of others. In a country where around 90% of the population claim to be Christians, which is the case in both Brazil and South Africa, this must mean something. It should mean that at least 90% of the population can be held accountable both as citizens of the country and as citizens of heaven who live in this world, albeit as pilgrims and strangers.

3. Sovereignty, loyalty and the Chosen People

German Egyptologist Jan Assmann (2009) has become famous for his critique of Judeo-Christian monotheism in what he called the "mosaic distinction": through Moses, raised as an Egyptian, the chosen people of God adopted a radically new way of believing that desacralized government and put the one and only God in charge based on a clear-cut distinction between true and false, creating exclusion and violence. The thesis has been discussed many times not least with theologians, especially Old Testament scholars and ethicists, as well as scholars from other fields, Jewish and Christian (Schieder 2014). In one of his last books, called *The Invention of Religion* (the German original title "Exodus" seems more appealing and more precise to me, although the impressive volume does indeed speak of a new religion *sui generis*), Assmann modified his thesis to a certain extent and distinguished between an earlier "monotheism of loyalty" based on God's revelation and the covenant between a liberating God and God's chosen people, and a later "monotheism of truth". This change was certainly helped by the quite radical reformulation of Pentateuch exegesis (Carr 2011; Oswald 2009; Römer 2007; Schmid 2023). The two main tendencies that produced and organized text during and after the Babylonian exile, the Priestly Document with Genesis and Exodus and Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic school, maintained a monotheism of loyalty through God's covenant with his people, normalized by quite an

original legal corpus. There is this very important triangle, then: God, after all the only ruler, is only precariously represented by the king, but also by other offices like judges, and eventually by priests; the *people*, with whom God establishes his covenant and who have to consent to it; and the *law*, which God gives for orientation and good organization so that the people recognize "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Ex 20:2, the introduction to the ten commandments).

Historically, a strict monotheism only comes about in and after the Babylonian Exile; before, there are numerous signs of tacit or even explicit recognition of other gods, even if YHWH is the strongest of all and the one with whom Israel is in a covenant. Like the Jews, Christians are bound to the God of the covenant, and it is, therefore, logical that covenantal theology, namely through the Calvinist tradition, has influenced politics considerably (see de Gruchy 1995; Witte 2007). Their prime loyalty is with God who binds Godself and God's people to the covenant. As we remember the confessions of Barmen (1934) and Belhar (1982/86), and even most recently the declaration of Orthodox theologians against the Russian world (*Russkii mir*) in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which follows Barmen's style and logic, this is reinforced (Declaration 2022; cf. von Sinner 2023). The goal at Barmen was to preserve, in a strongly Christocentric mode, the church from being compromised by neopagan Nazism, and for some – sadly, for some only: note no Barmen thesis directly addresses it – the defence of the Jews against their systematic destruction by the Nazis.

The goal of Belhar was to denounce apartheid as sin, appropriately, I would say, with a more refined and less exclusive Trinitarian theology, and with an ethical emphasis on visible unity, justice and reconciliation (both in PCUSA 2016).

The goal of the *Russkii mir* declaration was to denounce too harmonious a symphony with the authoritarian state as heresy. These are all noble and, indeed, necessary intentions that seek to protect victims of exacerbated state action by invoking God's sovereignty against the ruler's sovereignty as configuring the ultimate loyalty Christians are called to obey. While they are directed toward the church and its heresies, affirming primary

and ultimate loyalty to God, they do have a political situation in mind, although it is not explicitly mentioned in either case.

However, in these times in Brazil and elsewhere, the *status confessionis* seems to be, in my view questionably so, invoked by religious groups and communities for much more complex and controversial issues in a pluralist, albeit polarized society, with a moralist agenda as mentioned above, but not engaged in a social justice agenda. One can find such an agenda today in Brazil and the U.S., but also in many places in Africa and Eastern Europe, in Russia and, to a lesser degree, also in Ukraine. The rejected positions are seen by many as a Western, decadent, post-Christian agenda even when held by churches, which is, according to its detractors, to be resisted in the name of Scripture, church tradition, and Christian morality. The problem I see here is not with a theological and political controversy, which has its place in any pluralist and democratic setting, and in the churches, but with the authoritarianism implied in many of such positions that become absolutized and might create or enhance violence to those who already are victims in society, like the LGBTQIA+ population. They also link up dangerously with authoritarian governments and say it is them who show loyalty to God, the true sovereign. Did not Barmen, Belhar, and the *Russkii mir* declaration remind us of God's sovereignty resisting human totalitarian and dictatorial authoritarianism?

4. Rethinking sovereignty

What are theological resources to deal with this problem? I first go to the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible. Especially in the exilic and post-exilic periods, God is portrayed as the absolute – in fact, the only – sovereign. It does not use this word, which was properly introduced by Jean Bodin ([1576] 2010) in the 16th century.[7] It indicates supreme power, which for Bodin was indivisible and absolute. As Old Testament scholarship affirms, it was an innovation in religious history to adapt, even in its formulation (cf. Deut 13; 28) the Neo-Assyrian vassal treaties in terms of God's covenant with God's people. The innovation is precisely that Godself is the subject of the

7 The word was already used by Philippe de Beaumanoir in the 13th century, however, and the content had been present and under debate long before its conceptualization by Bodin, as argued by Kritsch 2002.

covenant, which is not mediated by a king. Godself is, then, the ultimate sovereign, the supreme authority and power to whom all loyalty is due. After all, only Godself is king and governs God's people by justice and good laws, a "priestly kingdom and a holy nation" as formulated in the book of Exodus (19:6) and reflected in 1 Peter 2:9, from where the priesthood of all believers takes its basis. Interestingly, it is explicitly mentioned that the people give their consent to the covenant: "Then he took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, 'All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.'" (Ex 24:7, NRSV), which is a remarkable register, although we know nothing about a process that had established the people's consent with some formal procedure. Based on the covenant offered by God and accepted by the people, a law is established that organizes life in the community. The protection of widows and orphans, slaves and foreigners now become a central part not of any king's decree, but of the law and covenant. In a seminal article published over thirty years ago, Old Testament scholar Frank Crüsemann affirmed that while thus a kind of "theocracy" (he always uses quotation marks) is established, "democracy" is founded at the same time. Both go together: "Theocracy" guarantees that the law is not subject to human (re-) formulation, which finds an analogy in the immutability of fundamental rights as established by the Brazilian and South African constitutions, among others. "They are basic rules to preserve given freedom. Within this framework, all political power lies with the people", Crüsemann (1993:214) affirms. In this sense, "theocracy" constitutes "democracy". Matter-of-factly, as Crüsemann shows, there never was a non-mediated government by God, but beyond the king, there were other offices like judges, elders, and priests which were elected by the people. Today, we know monarchies, like the British, which are constitutionally bound and to which the saying fits well: *le roi règne, mais il ne gouverne pas* – "the king reigns, but does not govern". The function of such a sovereign is to provide unity, consistency and the defence of the faith, although more as a figure than as an individual, and not mingling with concrete political decisions, which are reserved to the Prime Minister and his or her government. In Germany, the President of the Federation has a similar function, and it may be no sheer coincidence many of the last ones were deep believers and served as a kind of national conscience. One was even an ordained Protestant minister. Of course, in Germany, the president is not a sovereign, but he exercises an analogous

function. Independent Brazil was, for 65 years, an empire. The sovereign was said to exercise a "moderating power", above party distinctions and disputes. That means he moves more towards the traditional term of *auctoritas* rather than *potestas*, towards authority rather than (concrete) power. Such sovereignty is different from a dictatorship.

In ecclesiastical and political terms, it is interesting that the pope exercises a double function, as the head of state in an absolute monarchy, and as the primate of the Church in quite, but not totally an absolute way – after all, even the pope is subject to God and the Gospel as witnessed in Scripture, he is bound by Apostolic Tradition and also by "natural reason" according to the Vatican I decree *Dei Filius* (Pittl 2019). Even the pope's infallibility as defined in the Dogmatic Constitution *Pastor Aeternus* is not unrestricted, being limited, for example, to matters of "morals and faith", and has been properly exercised only twice in recent history. Even Pope John Paul II's definitive pronouncement on the church's lack of authority for ordaining women to the priesthood seems to not properly fulfil the criteria for a teaching *ex-cathedra*.[8] Exercising this very sovereignty, the current pope, Francis, seeks to at least partially overcome or redefine it in synodality. In the corresponding documents, the notion "people of God", the *Laos theou* and therefore the laity, is a recurring category – a biblical one, obviously, but also strong in documents of the II Vatican Council. This brings me to the next section on the people and the people of God.

5. On the people and the people of God

The qualification for being part of the people of God, in a Christian view, is baptism. This is the first and possibly foremost *caracter indelebilis*, the indestructible character of one's incorporation into the people of God. Especially when infant baptism is still the norm in many churches, there is nothing presupposed from the baptismal candidate to receive the visible sign of God's gift of redemption. However, the life that follows, the path

8 John Paul II. 1994, nr. 4, states: "Wherefore, so that all doubt may be removed regarding a matter of great importance, a matter which pertains to the Church's divine constitution itself, in virtue of my ministry of confirming the brethren (cf. Lk 22:32) I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful."

of Christian initiation and discipleship, is fraught with expectations, from the baptized him- or herself, the congregation, and God. As human life is permeated by error and sin, so is Christian life. "People" is a precarious category which needs constant reconstruction (cf. von Sinner and Gabatz 2021). Nazi totalitarianism, fascism, apartheid, and also more recently populism all lay claim to "the people", who they are, what they think, and what they want. While there are empirical elements and indeed elections that give some support to such a notion, it is intentionally constructed and homogenized – usually from above by a leading person or group that tends to become authoritarian and, indeed, anti-democratic. A more interesting way of looking at the people is, in my view, Ernesto Laclau's comprehension of "the people" in what he understands to be a necessary "populism" oriented not by specific content, but by an "empty signifier" (Laclau 2007).

Two things are very important here: the formation of a people as a constant process, and the taking seriously of popular articulations where people are subjects and not simply a manoeuvrable mass. Maybe astonishingly, Laclau was inspired by Carl Schmitt, mainly in his criticism of liberalism, especially in its association with economics and technology, but also in his view of the public sphere as a field of conflict (cf. Mouffe 1999; Pittl 2019). For Laclau, once God as warranter of universality and the incarnate Son as the mediator between universality and particularity has been lost in secularization, there is only particularity left which must be articulated by hegemony. Neither can it be substituted by an actor's "pure and universal human essence" (Laclau 1992:131), which for Marx was the proletariat. Like Schmitt, Laclau and his partner Chantal Mouffe are sceptical as to conversation and discourse in seemingly endless conversation – we can hear criticism of Jürgen Habermas here, as well as of Richard Rorty and John Rawls. "Two much emphasis on consensus […] leads to apathy and a disaffection with political participation", Mouffe (2013:7; cf. Pittl 2019:227) affirms. While I believe she has a point in stressing the importance of the passionate, affective and indeed the conflictive element in politics, it seems to me that for a populist dynamic to occur in productive ways, more than a leader and hegemonic group of people are needed, i.e. a body of law and fundamental rights with a state to guarantee it. Mouffe herself recognizes this when she favours a "left populism" that is not based on a Schmittian antagonism of friend and foe, but on an "agonism" between adversaries

(Mouffe 2019:91) in a pluralist democracy – which in turn is, I would say, in dire need precisely of conversation. Within this, also society and the state need a "Torah" in the sense of orientation and guidance. Politically speaking, the people are – at least in theory – sovereign, but not absolute. *Vox populi* is not always *vox Dei*, as the saying goes since the Roman politician and philosopher Cicero.

Theologically speaking, the people of God are not sovereign, but they participate in God's representation on earth, sharing in the government of God's church. While they can do this together with their ordained ministers and those who have oversight, it is not simply by majority vote that truth is established, and the right policy elaborated. The people of God have rights which can and should indeed be exercised, but they are also constrained by God's covenant and law. Sovereignty can be collective, and indeed shared, and is never absolute. Human sovereignty is to be demystified and tamed by the Lord over the powers, as Karl Barth affirmed. The sovereign leader is "dehydrated", as Brazilian common political language would have it, i.e. stripped of much of his power. In contrast, we could say God's sovereignty is absolute, but I am not sure this brings us much further, given that it is always mediated – by Christ the mediator and by the baptized people of God as Christ's representatives. Therefore, I contend that the transcendent reference to a Trinitarian, not monarchical, but relational God as supreme power needs an immanent reference to the whole people of God qualified by the common binding to a covenant with a corresponding set of laws. As Assmann (2018:188) underlined, it is from God's covenant that a notion of "people" emerges that is founded "not on common descent, land, language, or sovereign rule but on divine law: the Torah".

6. Concluding

I have tried to explore the relation and distinction between God, the nation, and the people, and the importance and complexity of the concept of sovereignty in this regard. The ambiguities and precarities of all these signifiers have come, I believe, clearly to the fore. They cannot be solved simply by "better" definitions, as over-definition might easily miss reality or else become authoritarian itself. Maybe sovereignty is not a concept at all in the first place, but rather an imagination, as Rebecca Klein (2016)

defends, or an event seen in a theo-poetical way, as put forward by Calvin Ullrich (2021) in his dialogue with John Caputo.

In any case, precarity, ambiguity and moving away from concepts do not dispense thorough empirical and conceptual reflection as to how well these terms help us to understand what is happening and to make a claim as to what should be happening. This can heed Derrida's (2011, 282; cf. Ullrich 2021, 245) notable statement that the "sovereignty of the people of the nation merely inaugurates a new form of the same fundamental structure", transferring God's omnipotent sovereignty to other subjects. We must go beyond that, both for political and theological reasons.

All these categories are both theological and political and can be developed as a theology of politics or a politics of theology. My position is to favour a secular view on politics, but theologically qualify Christian participation in it, and contribute to political discourse in a secular, plural state with positions and categories that are understandable and agreeable even when the underlying conception is not acceptable to all. While a sovereign God can counter a dictator, the category of sovereignty must be tempered in a pluralist society, which is an invitation to think of Godself as relational rather than monarchical, interactive rather than absolute, binding Godself and God's people in loyalty to a covenant. Of course, all of this is subject to comprehension and interpretation, as God is not acting directly in the world, but always in a mediated way. Christ's representatives, the baptized people of God in all times and places, live and act amid a deeply ambiguous world, where good and evil intermingle. Sin as a fact is inevitable and sometimes sin as a deed has to be committed to prevent greater evil, of which Bonhoeffer's thought and life witness are a clear example. If speaking of God's supreme authority and power, God's sovereignty is to make any sense today, it is bearing this in mind, as a constant reminder of the relativity of any human power as well as any human claim on God ("God wills it!" as the crusaders shouted), without renouncing on saying words on today's politics that have their root in God's Word as we understand it. In any case, such relativizing falls back on God's representatives also. One does well to humbly remember this.

Bibliography

Assmann, J. (2009). *Moses the Egyptian. The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Assmann, J. (2018). *The Invention of Religion. Faith and Covenant in the Book of Exodus*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bethge, E. (2005). *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Eine Biographie* [1967]. 9th edition, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlaghaus.

Bodin, J. [1576] (2010). *On Sovereignty*. Edited and translated by Julian H. Franklin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Carr, D.M. (2011). *The Formation of the Hebrew Bible. A New Reconstruction*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press.

Crüsemann, F. (1993). "Theokratie" als „Demokratie". Zur politischen Konzeption des Deuteronomiums, in K. Raaflaub, (ed.). *Anfänge politischen Denkens. Die nahöstlichen Kulturen und die Griechen*. München: R. Oldenbourg. 199–214.

Declaration on the "Russian world" (russkii mir) teaching. *Public Orthodoxy*, 13th March, 2022. [Online]. Available: https://publicorthodoxy.org/2022/03/13/a-declaration-on-the-russian-world-russkii-mir-teaching/ [Accessed: 7 June 2024].

de Gruchy, J.W. (1995). *Christianity and Democracy: A Theology for a Just World Order*. Cape Town/Johannesburg: David Philip.

Derrida, J. (2011). *The Beast and The Sovereign: Vol. I*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Ice, Thomas (2009). What is Dominion Theology? *Article Archives,* 74. [Online]. Available: https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/pretrib_arch/74 [Accessed: 29 August 2024].

John Paul II. *Apostolic Letter "Ordinatio Sacerdotalis"* of 22 May 1994. [Online]. Available: https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19940522_ordinatio-sacerdotalis.html [Accessed: 5 June, 2024].

Kessler, N. (1988). A esperança de um novo início. *Jornal Mensageiro da Paz*, October 1988.

Klein, R. (2016). *Depotenzierung der Souveränität. Religion und politische Ideologie bei Claude Lefort, lavoj Žižek und Karl Barth.* Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

Kritsch, R. (2002). *Soberania: a construção de um conceito.* São Paulo: Humanitas – FFLCH/Universidade de São Paulo; Imprensa Oficial do Estado.

Laclau, E. (1992). Ernesto Laclau, Beyond Emancipation, *Development and Change,* 23(3):121–137.

Laclau, E. (2007). *On populist reason*. London/New York: Verso.

Maria, J. J. de O. (2024). *Assembleia de Deus e sua atuação no espaço público: política, ação social e ecóloga entre 2003 e 2022.* Unpublished PhD dissertation, Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Paraná, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Teologia.

Mouffe, C. (ed.). (1999). *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt.* London/New York: Verso.

Mouffe, C. (2013). *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically.* London:/New York: Verso.

Mouffe, C. (2019). *For a Left Populism*. London/New York: Verso.

Oswald, W. (2009). *Staatstheorie im Alten Israel. Der politische Diskurs im Pentateuch und in den Geschichtsbüchern des Alten Testaments.* Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.

PCUSA. (2016). *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Part I: Book of Confessions.* Louisville: Office of the General Assembly Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). [Online]. Available: https://www.pcusa.org/resource/book-confessions/ [Accessed: 05 June 2024].

Pittl, S. (2019). The Spectres of Schmitt. Identity, Decision, and the Name of YHWH. *Louvain Studies,* 42:211–239.

Römer, T. (2007). *The So-Called Deuteronomistic History. A Sociological, Historical and Literary Introduction.* London/New York: T&T Clark.

Schieder, R. (ed.). (2014*). Die Gewalt des einen Gottes: Die Monotheismus-Debatte zwischen Jan Assmann, Micha Brumlik, Rolf Schieder, Peter Sloterdijk und anderen*. Berlin: Berlin University Press.

Schmid, K. (2023). *The Scribes of the Torah. The Formation of the Pentateuch in its Literary and Historical Contexts.* Atlanta: SBL Press.

von Sinner, R. and C. Gabatz. (2021). Populism and "People": Precarities and Polarizations as a Challenge and Task for a Public Theology. *International Journal of Public Theology,* 15(3):349–368.

von Sinner, R. (2021). *Public Theology in the Secular State. A Perspective from the Global South*. Zurich: LIT.

von Sinner, R. (2022). Is there no sense of shame among *evangélicos*? The idolatry of Bolsonaro and the constraints of the Gospel. *International Journal of Public Theology,* 16(2):119–138.

von Sinner, R. (2023). Ecumenical Lessons from the War Against Ukraine. Passionate Protest and Loving Patience. In K. Nalwamba and B. Simon, (eds.). *Christ's Love (Re)moves Borders. Reflections from GETI 2022.* Geneva; WCC. 111–126.

Ullrich, C. (2021). *Sovereignty and Event: The Political in John D. Caputo's Radical Theology*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

Witte Jr., J. (2007). *The Reformation of Rights. Law, Religion, and Human Rights in Early Modern Calvinism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.