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FRIENDSHIP IN THE NEW POLITICAL THEOLOGIES

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Abstract

As a distinct academic discipline, political theology rose and fell with Carl Schmitt. If there was any hope of redeeming it, the discipline would have to be entirely renewed. A deep-seated and understudied feature of that renewal lies in the reconceptualisation of the political relation. Jürgen Moltmann as it were opened up Schmitt's closed friendship by separating classical and especially Aristotelian from Christian and typically Augustinian friendship. I examine this reconceptualisation and demonstrate that it is inadequate. Yet, in its essence, the reconceptualisation seems to represent dogma also in the new forms of political theologies that ensued from the renewal. I demonstrate this in reference to the friendship accounts of Gilbert Meilaender and Guido de Graaff. This has produced a significant lacuna in the literature. There is no systematic account of civic friendship in contemporary political theology. Positioned in that lacuna, I offer a critical perspective on political theology as a discipline.

Introduction

With the publication of Carl Schmitt's *Political Theology*, a space for political theology as a distinct discipline in the modern academy emerged. The significant concepts of the nation-state, Schmitt proposes, are secularised theological concepts.[1] Political sovereignty mirrors divine sovereignty, and similarly, legal codes mirror the divine law, and the nation-state's aspirations for establishing order in a world of chaos mirror the salvific mission of redeeming the world from sin. Moreover, Schmitt reckons that political sovereignty resides in the ability to decide the 'exception', to suspend positive law (rather than decreeing it), just as divine sovereignty is revealed to us in the ability to suspend the laws of nature, that is, in performing miracles.[2] It is this exception, there-

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[1] Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, translated by George Schwab (The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 36. See also Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, expanded edition, translated by George Schwab (The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 42.

[2] Ibid., 4, 36.

fore, that should occupy us as students of politics; it is sovereignty and not rules or norms that comprises the existential principle of the political.[3]

Leo Strauss notes that for Schmitt 'the political is a basic characteristic of human life' such that we 'cannot escape politics'.[4] In modernity, as Schmitt sees it, the political manifests itself in a threefold conceptual structure: the political entity—which in modernity is a state centred around a nation, *viz*. the nation-state—is the domain of the political and thus the location of the exercise of politics. The authority of politics resides in the political entity's sovereignty. In *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt grounds this sovereignty in the friend-enemy distinction, which is intrinsically entangled with the aforementioned exception: the ability to decide the exception involves the ability 'to distinguish correctly the real friend and the real enemy'.[5] Politics therefore captures 'the most intense and extreme antagonism'.[6] That is not to say that politics consists in waging war against enemies abroad, or dominating 'the domestic enemy'.[7] We should rather think of Schmittian politics as '*the mode of behavior* which is determined by this possibility' for warfare and domination.[8]

According to Schmitt, the enemy is not necessarily evil.[9] Rather, the enemy is the stranger who, *ipso facto*, poses a potential or actual threat to the political entity and its 'way of life'.[10] To protect this way of life, Schmitt advocates a nation-state that increases and expands its powers by way of technologisation, so as to awaken the 'total state'—a political entity that is self-conscious of itself as sovereign.[11] Needless to say, this theory served to sanction horrific suffering and grave injustices, culminating in the Holocaust. In the shadow of its terrible smog, Johann Baptist Metz and Jürgen Moltmann reckoned it necessary either to destroy political theology altogether—this womb of Leviathans—or entirely renew the discipline.[12] According to Metz and Moltmann, the new political theology had to answer questions like: what made the Holocaust possible? How can we ensure that nothing like it will ever happen again? The so-called new political theologians sought to do this by inverting Schmitt's political theology, as they understood it, by lamenting rather than sanctioning suffering and injustices, critiquing rather than exercising power, and judging earthly authorities rather than exalting them. For Metz and Moltmann, this meant a politics of equality and freedom, democracy and pluralism.[13]

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[3] Ibid., 15.

[4] Leo Strauss, 'Notes on The Concept of the Political', in *Political Theology* (The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 110. See also Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 35; 51-52; 78.

[5] Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 37. See also 26; 33-35.

[6] Ibid., 29.

[7] Ibid., 46.

[8] Ibid., 37 (my emphasis). See also 33-35.

[9] Two well-known but important points should be added here. First, the Schmittian enemy is allegedly a public rather than personal enemy (*hostis*, not *inimicus*). Second, the friend-enemy distinction in politics corresponds to the good-evil distinction in ethics, the beautiful-ugly distinction in aesthetics, and the profitable-unprofitable distinction in economics, ibid., 28-29; 38; 46; 67-68.

[10] Ibid., 27.

[11] See Richard Wolin, 'Carl Schmitt, Political Existentialism, and the Total State', *Theory and Society* 19, no. 4 (1990): esp. 407-9.

[12] Jürgen Moltmann, 'Covenant or Leviathan? Political Theology for Modern Times', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 47 (2009): 38-39; Jürgen Moltmann, 'European Political Theology', in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Political Theology*, edited by Craig Hovey and Elizabeth Phillips (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 8.

[13] See Scott Paeth, 'Jürgen Moltmann and the New Political Theology', in *T&T Clark Handbook of Political Theology*, edited by Rubén Rosario Rodríguez (T&T Clark Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), 213.

A deep-seated but understudied feature of this renewal lies in the reconceptualisation of Schmitt's political relation; Moltmann as it were opens up Schmitt's closed friendship.[14] He does so by offering an alternative theological account of friendship, based not on classical and specifically Aristotelian friendship (*philia*, *amicitia*) but on Christian and typically Augustinian charity (*agape*, *caritas*). It seems that this reconceptualisation is more or less accepted as dogma in the new political theology—not only as a historical reckoning, but also in the various new forms of political theology that ensued from it. The gist of the dogma is this: *philia* is the relational form of the old political theologies and should be conquered and disarmed by *agape*.[15]

In this article, I examine friendship in the new political theologies. Having outlined a Moltmannian taxonomy of political theology in section one, I go on to consider Moltmann's 'open friendship' in section two. It is an inadequate account. I then turn, in section three, to Guido de Graaff's *Politics in Friendship*, which is the only systematic account of friendship on offer in contemporary political theology. De Graaff finds political value in friendship, but not as a *political* concept. In critical engagement with Gilbert Meilaender, de Graaff contends that friendship is a *para*-political concept: a phenomenon that exists alongside, not within, politics—I consider this concept in section four. De Graaff's account is Moltmannian in the sense that a classical and allegedly Aristotelian concept of friendship is pitted against a Christian and Augustinian concept. I demonstrate that this Aristotelian-Augustinian dichotomy is untenable. Consequently, we find an unjustified lacuna: there is no systematic account of civic friendship in contemporary political theology. Situated in that lacuna, I offer—in the fifth and final section of the essay—a critical perspective on political theology as a discipline, and specifically the manifestation of Aristotelian-Augustinian disagreements. The civic friendship lacuna indicates not only where there might be space for an alternative approach to political theology, but also how it can be developed.

Section One: From Old to New Political Theologies: A Moltmannian Taxonomy

I shall use Moltmann's article 'European Political Theology' to expound the aforementioned distinction between old and new political theology in twentieth-century Europe

[14] Ibid., 211.

[15] This kind of resistance against *philia* is not evident in political philosophy and theory. For instance, in *Political Liberalism: Expanded Edition* (Columbia University Press, 2005), John Rawls identifies civic friendship as the 'nature of the political relation' in liberal democracies (447). And interestingly, the resistance is not found specifically in moral theology either. In 'The Gift of the Church and the Gifts God Gives It' (in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2011) Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells claim that friendship is 'at the center of the moral life' (16). Yet, notably, among the moral theologians, friendship's possible bearing on politics is by and large neglected—see e.g. Paul J. Wadell's *Friendship and the Moral Life* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1989) and Edward Collins Vacek's *Love, Human and Divine: The Heart of Christian Ethics* (Georgetown University Press, 1994)—or if considered, then, as we shall see in Gilbert Meilaender's *Friendship* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1981) and Guido de Graaff's *Politics in Friendship: A Theological Account* (Bloomsbury, 2014), denied a central place in *political* life. A case in point is the concluding section of chapter 6 in Eric Gregory's *Politics and the Order of Love* (The University of Chicago Press, 2010), which seems to serve as an exception to the rule. 'Civic friendship', according to Gregory's Augustine, 'is a species of friendship that highlights the ethical relation as fundamental for political community' (358). And for Augustine, that ethical relation must be grounded in God. Gregory seems to simply assume that this understanding of friendship can be coherently combined with a liberal political theory (see 147-48).

(or the West) by identifying further subcategories. I will label one such subcategory 'old forms of political theology'; it comprises all the different kinds of pre-modern and early modern conceptions and theories of political or public religion.[16] For the pre-moderns, the world was saturated by spirit, such that morality, order, and stability necessarily involved religion, which in turn implicated politics.[17] In pre-modern and then early modern Europe, this old form of political theology tended towards monarchy. And crucially, it was brought to bear on conflicts between authority and anarchy that arose in the Enlightenment. Notably, as Schmitt tells us, for Joseph de Maistre, authority of a specific kind, namely sovereignty, is necessary for forging a people into a united, political entity—and the monarch, embodying a divinely ordained political institution, was uniquely positioned to exercise such sovereignty.[18]

However, as revolutions in Europe dethroned (actually or effectively) one royal house after the other, sovereignty in the monarchical form was no longer accessible. Monarchy, it seemed, had to be substituted with dictatorship.[19] Schmitt, of course, recognises the political need for sovereignty.[20] Yet, surprisingly, he does not immediately accept the legitimacy of dictatorship.[21] As pointed out, Schmitt proposes to ground modern sovereignty not in dictatorship, but in the friend-enemy distinction. He therefore introduces a second subcategory of political theology, the paradigmatic form of old political theology in modernity, which I label 'Old Political Theology'.[22]

For Old Political Theology, the nation-state is demarcated by and thus arises as an intelligible phenomenon on the border between friend and enemy. It is important to note that the friend-enemy distinction complicates the connection between Old Political Theology and the older forms of political theology. In some of the classical forms of political theology, the city-state or republic was based on a positive, and typically Aristotelian, account of friendship.[23] But for Schmitt, as Strauss points out, and as we have observed, *enmity* is the fundamental political reality.[24] The unity of the 'friends' is based on their collective separation from a common enemy. For the classical forms of political theology, however, it is the other way around: friendship is the positive, fundamental political reality, and enmity is correspondingly defined negatively in relation to friendship.

In this Moltmannian taxonomy, the old subcategories are mirrored in new ones. I label, with Moltmann, a third subcategory 'New Political Theology'; this is the kind of political theology that Metz and Moltmann introduced, which sought to correct the fatal and dangerous flaws of Old Political Theology.[25] One such flaw, according to New

[16] Moltmann, 'European Political Theology', 3; 4-7.

[17] Cicero is the famous example, see esp. *Amic*. 23; *Off*. 1.54–1.55. See also *Dom*. 109; *Leg*. 2.30; 2.8–2.10; 18–22; 2.42–2.43; *Nat. D*. 2.8; 2.75-80; 3.5-6.

[18] Schmitt, *Political Theology*, chap. 4.

[19] Ibid., 51-52; 65-66.

[20] In fact, Schmitt finds no logical alternatives: even anarchism presupposes sovereignty, for anarchism is the sovereign act to abolish sovereignty. See ibid., 66.

[21] Ibid. Cf. Wolin, 'Carl Schmitt, Political Existentialism, and the Total State', 409.

[22] See Moltmann, 'European Political Theology', 7-8.

[23] To proceed with the Cicero example: according to Lorraine Smith Pangle, Cicero's understanding of friendship—especially as this is presented in *De Amicitia*—is 'thoroughly Aristotelian [in] spirit', *Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 104.

[24] Strauss, 'Notes on *The Concept of the Political*', 103-4. See also Leo Strauss, 'Letter Two', in *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue*, edited by Heinrich Meier (The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 125.

[25] Moltmann, 'European Political Theology', 8-14.

Political Theology, was the compartmentalisation and privatisation of faith, rendering the nation-state unrestrained by any theological consciousness. As a historical reckoning, New Political Theology produced a variety of 'new forms of political theology', which is my label for the fourth subcategory. The new forms of political theology, Moltmann reckons, are concerned with such things as 'social justice, just peace, and the integrity of creation', and we might perhaps add to the list, especially upon entering the twenty-first century: 'Marxist and anarchist currents, Black studies, feminist theory, queer theory, and decolonial theory'.[26] The new forms characteristically comprise a 'socialist' and 'radical democratic theology of human rights and the rights of nature'.[27]

It is important to note that even though the new forms of political theology can be said to be characteristically morally progressive and leftist, we also see more or less morally conservative and rightist forms of new political theology, with Anabaptist, Anglican, and Reformed variations. Perhaps in reaction to morally progressive and leftist forms of new political theology, there has also emerged neo-old forms of political theology, such as revived Protestant and specifically Evangelical loyalty to conservative and authoritarian leaders, resurgent Catholic interest in integralism, and a reinforced Orthodox bent towards nationalism.

In sum, the Moltmannian taxonomy leaves us with two principal categories of political theology—old and new—with various subcategories. For the sake of simplicity, I refer to the subcategories of the old (i.e., old forms of political theology; Old Political Theology; neo-old forms of political theology) jointly as 'old political theologies', and similarly the subcategories of the new (i.e., New Political Theology; new forms of political theology) as 'new political theologies'. Presently I shall centre specifically on Moltmann's presentation of New Political Theology and analyse it further, for it seems to capture a crucial moment in the history of political theology. It did not only challenge and replace Old Political Theology, the paradigmatic form of old political theologies in modernity, but served itself as a paradigm for the new political theologies.

According to Moltmann, New Political Theology was originally established by Metz and then immediately supported by Moltmann as a 'criticism of public affairs in the tradition of prophets'.[28] It was not a theology devoted to any specific political entity or community. Rather, it was a 'theology of the world'—transforming political theology from a discipline in ethics or politics to a 'public consciousness of church and theology in modern times'.[29] As such, New Political Theology sought to resist the aforementioned compartmentalisation and privatisation of Christian faith by formulating the Christian message in the context of modern society.[30] The church, in New Political Theology, was to be a 'social-critical institution', and theology 'a liberating account of faith and hope'.[31]

[26] Ibid., 4; Luke Bretherton, Vincent W. Lloyd, Valentina Napolitano, 'Introduction: Trajectories in Political Theology', in *What is Political Theology?* (Columbia University Press, 2026), 5. See also Moltmann, 'European Political Theology', 14-17.

[27] Moltmann, 'European Political Theology', 13. For instance, Bretherton, Lloyd, and Napolitano align themselves with a 'more-left-than-liberal-politics', in 'Introduction: Trajectories in Political Theology', 9. See also Luke Bretherton, 'Looking to the Future', in *What is Political Theology?* (Columbia University Press, 2026), 209.

[28] Ibid., 3.

[29] Ibid., 9.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.

This critical theological consciousness was awakened by Old Political Theology and the Leviathan it suckled. Moltmann mounted a forceful theological attack on this Leviathan: it is an entity whose will is itself law, for it is *per se* unbound even by natural law, and is thus, *ipso facto*, the 'lawless one'—that is, an Antichristic figure.[32] Moltmann contended, as Schmitt already had conceded,[33] that this understanding of the nation-state 'presupposes a negative anthropology in order to legitimate a positive theology of power, authority and sovereignty'.[34] The condition of sin, this predicament of chaos and confusion, requires the intervention of a Leviathan to save us from others and ourself.

In response, New Political Theology proposed a negative theology of power, authority, and sovereignty combined with a 'positive anthropology' that grounds such power, authority, and sovereignty in the 'covenant of free [and equal] people'.[35] Here is an attempt to hold together the 'creative dispositions' of humans in this world with an anticipation of the kingdom of God in the world to come, that is, redeemed creation.[36] Moltmann thus recognises both that community belongs 'to the essence and not just to the alienation of humankind', and that the nation-state is perverted by 'demonism' and 'sin'.[37] For Moltmann, New Political Theology 'replaces' hierarchy in both church and nation-state: in the first case, with the 'base-communities' of 'the covenant of believers', characterised by freedom and equality, and in the second, with democracy and pluralism.[38] In a sense, therefore, Moltmann exchanges Schmitt's sovereign nation-state with sovereign individuals.

New Political Theology also shifts our focus away from the nation-state, and specifically variations of political religion and the power of the sovereign, to the church and Christian communities within the nation-state.[39] In other words, New Political Theology accepts the *liberal* nation-state as a legitimate political entity or community that serves the purpose of restraining sin—so as to bolster the freedom and equality of its citizens—while also stressing that, precisely because of sin, the nation-state will be constantly entangled in injustice. On this understanding, there is profound conflict between communities engaged in politics and Christian communities.[40]

Finally, according to Moltmann, New Political Theology seeks to 'to make theology aware' of political injustices and antagonisms—and especially 'the political causes and political effects' of theology itself—and to critique and '*judge* them in the light of the gospel'.[41] For the gospel reveals to us the kingdom of God, which both subverts and perfects the liberal nation-state, while simultaneously stirring 'the political

[32] Moltmann, 'Covenant or Leviathan?', 29-32.
[33] Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 58; 61; 65.
[34] Moltmann, 'Covenant or Leviathan?', 33.
[35] Ibid., 34.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid., 34-35.
[39] Moltmann, 'European Political Theology', 9.
[40] See ibid., 10.
[41] Ibid., 18 (my emphasis). This kind of judging is the mode of influential new forms of political theology, e.g. Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgement* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), esp. Part III; Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), especially chap. 10.

consciousness' of theology.[42] That brings us to Moltmann's reconceptualisation of friendship, which seems to attempt this very thing.

Section Two: Moltmann and the Opening Up of Closed Friendship

Moltmann says that Jesus should not only be thought of in terms of the three divine offices—Prophet, Priest, and King—but also, and fundamentally, as Friend.[43] In and by Christ, we are made friends of God: Christ opens or liberates that which Moltmann takes to be closed in classical and specifically Aristotelian friendship.[44] To examine this renewed understanding of friendship, I shall focus on Moltmann's essay 'Open Friendship'.[45] In it, Moltmann wants to demonstrate a conflict between Aristotelian and Christian concepts of friendship, between *philia* and *agape*.[46] According to Moltmann, *agape* is an open friendship characterised by respect, affection, and faithfulness. It is opposed to any notion of 'function', and specifically the reciprocity that closes, so to say, *philia*, making it exclusive among certain chosen people.[47] Moltmann even claims that *agape* is opposed to obligation: a genuine friend 'demands nothing' from us.[48] In fact, there is 'no ideal image' of friendship.[49] Furthermore, in light of the gospels, Moltmann tells us, we see that *agape* rather than *philia* represents genuine friendship.

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[42] Jürgen Moltmann, *Politische Theologie, Politische Ethik* (Kaiser, 1984), 39 (cited in Paeth, 'Jürgen Moltmann and the New Political Theology', 211).

[43] Jürgen Moltmann, 'Open Friendship: Aristotelian and Christian Concepts', in *The Changing Face of Friendship*, edited by Leroy S. Rouner (University of Notre Dame Press, 1994): 32-34. The essay has been re-published on a number of occasions: *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution of Messianic Ecclesiology*, translated by Margareth Kohl (SCM Press, 1978), 114-21; *The Open Church: Invitation to a Messianic Lifestyle*, translated by M. Douglas Meeks (SCM Press Ltd., 1978), 51-64 (alternative title: *The Passion for Life: A Messianic Lifestyle*).

[44] Moltmann, 'Open Friendship', 40-41. Open friendship can be taken to be the relational constitution of Moltmann's 'exodus church', the aforementioned covenant of free and equal believers in modernity, which critiques and judges modern politics from the eschatological perspective of God's kingdom. The exodus church is liberated from the world, yet missionally sent to it, and must therefore remain amidst it, although constantly on the move in changing socio-political environments. See Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, translated by James W. Leitch (Fortress Press, 1993), chap. 5, see esp. 320. The critique is an eschatological 'political hermeneutic', involving the practice of liberation: Jürgen Moltmann, *On Human Dignity: Political Theology and Ethics*, translated by M. Douglas Meeks (Fortress Press, 1984), see esp. 106-7. For Moltmann, open friendship is not only the relational constitution, but also the task and end of the church: Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 314-17.

[45] Moltmann, 'Open Friendship', 29-42.

[46] Anders Nygren's landmark study *Agape and Eros*, from 1930, is presumably an important theological backdrop here. Like *eros*, Nygren regards friendship or *philia* as antithetical to *agape*. But unlike *eros*, Nygren does not offer friendship much thought for, as Nygren says, there is sheer 'hopelessness' in trying to express the meaning of *agape* by 'the alien idea' of *philia*. That is because the normative force of friendship is reciprocity and self-love. But God is eternally sovereign to humans and if we were to approach our relation to God in terms of friendship, then we would shape God in our own image, rather than being shaped in God's image. Yet there are important traditions—from classical philosophy, both Greek (Aristotle) and Roman (Cicero), and theology (Augustine), to mediaeval scholasticism (Aquinas) and monasticism (Aelred)—that have approached the God-human relation precisely in terms of *philia*. Nygren connects such approaches to paganism and heresy, and, specifically, the notion of 'friendship with God' to the 'the fundamental perversion in the Catholic doctrine of love'—accusations which Schmitt seemed to validate perfectly. See Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (SPCK, 1953), 645; 362; 714-15; 31.

[47] Moltmann, 'Open Friendship', 30.

[48] Ibid., 29. See also 31.

[49] Ibid., 30.

There is an important problem with the 'closedness' of Aristotelian friendship; as Moltmann observes, it appears to produce elitist cliques. But open friendship does not provide us with an adequate solution. First, there must surely be *some* function that pertains to the friend *qua* friend? Otherwise friendship, in attempting to include everyone, ends up with no-one. Second, and similarly, the friend must be bound by *some* kind of obligation in order to remain, in an intelligible sense, 'friend' as distinct from non-friend? Third, granted that Moltmann identifies God as Friend, and humans as an image of God, there must be *some* ideal image of the friend? Moltmann does admit that friendship involves a 'promise to walk with each other and to be there for each other', which indicates both function and obligation.[50] And since reciprocity, for Moltmann, is the '*opposite* picture of friendship', there also seems to be some kind of ideal image of friendship.[51] Presumably, that ideal image is found in Jesus Christ, the Friend. Moltmann therefore opens a relational space in which there are no obligations, no ideals, except for the obligation to model the relational ideal of Jesus Christ.

This, of course, renders Moltmann's open friendship an internally inconsistent concept. To understand better whether these inconsistencies are rhetorical issues on the surface or whether they reach to the core of Moltmann's open friendship, I will examine the two scriptural passages by which Moltmann opens up classical or Aristotelian friendship. The first passage is found in Luke 5, where the Pharisees charge Jesus guilty by association: Jesus, we are told, is the friend of 'tax collectors and sinners'.[52] Jesus is indeed guilty as charged: 'I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance'.[53] Moltmann explains that Jesus demonstrates 'acceptance' of the tax collectors and sinners and thus 'sets their oppressed humanity free'.[54] In liberating them, it is the tax collectors and sinners—not the Pharisees—who will find themselves at the 'marriage feast' of the Lamb.[55]

Moltmann's appeal to the 'marriage feast' demands our attention. We find the parable of the Wedding Feast in Matthew 22, paralleled by the Great Banquet in Luke 14. In both parables, we learn that many are invited, but most either decline or defer responding. It is 'the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame', the tax collectors and sinners, that accept the invitation.[56] When it comes to the dynamics by which people find themselves at the marriage feast, there is therefore quite evidently an element of reciprocity involved. Jesus accepts the guests by inviting them, and the guests accept Jesus by responding to the invitation and coming to the feast. Moltmann's nonchalant rejection of reciprocity therefore prevents inquiry into the nature and purpose of this kind of reciprocity, and its significance for friendship with Jesus Christ.[57]

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[50] Ibid., 31.

[51] Ibid. (my emphasis).

[52] Luke 5:27.

[53] Luke 5:32.

[54] Moltmann, 'Open Friendship', 31.

[55] Ibid., 31. See Revelation 16:6-9.

[56] Luke 14:21.

[57] See John Milbank's landmark study on theology and gift, in which it is demonstrated that if we do away with reciprocity, the gift itself loses the context in which it is intelligible *as* gift, in 'Can a Gift Be Given? Prolegomena to a Future Trinitarian Metaphysics', *Modern Theology* 11, no 1 (January 1995): 119-61.

That leads to the second passage, in John 15, where Jesus rather strikingly names his disciples 'my friends'.[58] This passage presents us with Moltmann's scriptural basis for claiming that friendship should be fundamental to our understanding of Jesus and thus God. Moltmann distinguishes between two senses by which the disciples can be said to be friends with God.[59] One is a narrow, exclusive sense. Abraham and Moses were both called 'friend' of God by virtue of being unique figures in the history of salvation; they were allowed to face God.[60] Then there is the other sense, which is broad and inclusive: in and by Christ each and every Christian is equally freed to enter into friendship with God.[61] After the Christ event, it is the latter rather than the former that captures the meaning of 'friendship' with God. Put differently, friendship with God was in some sense closed in the old covenant, but it has been opened up in the new covenant.

There are, however, problems with Moltmann's exegesis. In John 15, Jesus' proclamation of friendship is not unconditional. Jesus immediately adds the condition that friendship is only possible 'if you do what I command you'.[62] Moltmann briefly notes this and takes it to emphasise the importance of loving others: Jesus commands us to 'love one another as I have loved you'.[63] Certainly, but it is a love that demands something. In fact, it demands everything from us, even our very self. For if Jesus is the Friend, then the Trinity is Friendship. That Friendship overflows with Friendship, into the dripping wounds of Christ: the enemies of God are invited to drink of this blood, so that they can enter into the Friendship. 'No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends'.[64] Thus, unsurprisingly, in the description of the apocalyptical marriage feast in the Book of Revelations, towards which the aforementioned parables point, the presence of the martyrs is a defining feature.

Although there is something unconditional about the love in John 15, in that everyone is invited into it, the friendship wherein we can participate in such love remains in an important sense conditional: to be friends with Christ, we must accept Christ's gift of self—and accepting that gift just is to give ourselves reciprocally to Christ. The divine friendship is therefore open-yet-closed. This closedness manifests itself in two different ways. On the one hand, it demarks the boundary of friendship, distinguishing friend from stranger, and indeed enemy. The stranger is invited into divine friendship, but in refusing that invitation, the stranger declares their enmity towards God. Similarly, if the 'friend' does not abide in Jesus Christ, like a branch on the vine, and carry its fruits, the 'friend' cannot be a genuine (or true or real) friend and will be cut off and thrown unto the fire.[65] There is, on the other hand, also a permeable notion of closedness *within* friendship communities. For instance, the twelve are invited into a special kind of friendship with Jesus, among whom Peter, James, and John, 'the disciple Jesus loved',

[58] John 15:14.
[59] Moltmann, 'Open Friendship', 37.
[60] Isaiah 41:8; Exodus 33:11.
[61] E.g. 1 Corinthians 13:12.
[62] John 15:14.
[63] John 15:12.
[64] John 15:13.
[65] John 15:1-6.

constitute a circle within the inner circle.[66] Human nature requires this kind of differentiation and limitation even among friends.

Moltmann's dichotomous distinction between the narrow, exclusive sense of friendship, and that which is broad and inclusive—that is, between closed and open friendship—is therefore resisted by the very scriptural passages that Moltmann appeals to. All the faithful will banquet with Abraham and Moses at God's table. But that is not because the Son's closed friendship with the Father has been opened, but because humanity, in and by the Son's gift of self, has been invited into it.[67] Whether the friendship will be open or closed *for us* depends on our response to that invitation. On this understanding, *agape* constitutes a relational precondition for, an invitation into, divine *philia*. Notably, this understanding can be found in Aquinas. The end of *caritas*—which here should be taken to be the kind of *agape* that humans can exercise by grace—is participation in the divine persons' sharing of self, and such sharing is the very basis of divine friendship.[68] Thus, for Aquinas, *philia* can be said to be conceptually 'necessary' for *caritas*.[69]

Moltmann's attempt to demonstrate an irredeemable conflict between classical and Christian concepts of friendship, between *philia* and *agape*, is therefore unsuccessful. Moltmann is not able to demonstrate that *agape* should or even can replace *philia* in human affairs. How can an open friendship, without reciprocity and obligations and ideals, remain a genuine *friendship*? This 'friendship' seems inherently incapable of binding people together in community, and thus to offer the relational properties that Moltmann regards as characteristic of open friendship: respect, affection, and faithfulness. If so, then in what sense can such friendship really stir a *political* consciousness of theology, or be the basis of Christian communities?

If anything, Moltmann's open friendship appears to dissolve community, be it political or Christian, which in turn undermines his understanding of human nature as essentially communal.[70] Moltmann even seems to infer that because Christians are called to love their enemies, Christian friendship must include enemies. We sense here a Derridean deconstruction of friendship, by which the enemy turns out to be the only genuine friend.[71] For the enemy is the 'friend' with whom we can be entirely free and equal; on a liberal interpretation of these terms it is the 'friend' with whom we need not share community. But as we have seen, Moltmann's inference fails to appreciate that Christians are called to love their enemies in order to convert them, to bring them into the community of divine friendship. And such friendship, according to Jesus Christ, involves reciprocity, obligations, and ideals—the very things that Moltmann rejects. In

[66] John 13:23. Notably, the open-yet-closed friendship is also propagated in the Early Church's liturgical practices: all were invited to partake in the Eucharist, but actual access was strictly restricted to the baptised. Indeed, the baptised were urged not even to repeat fragments of the liturgy to the unbaptised; a tendency to reticence that scholars have called the 'discipline of the secret'. See 'disciplina arcani', *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, edited by Andrew Louth (Oxford University Press, 2022).

[67] Matthew 8:11.

[68] *ST* II-II, q. 25, a. 2. See also Jonathan Kanary, 'Transforming Friendship: Thomas Aquinas on Charity as Friendship with God', *Irish Theological Quarterly* 85, no. 4 (2020): esp. 370-88.

[69] *ST* II-II, q. 23, a. 1. Aquinas even defines *caritas* as 'a kind of friendship' in *ST* I-II q. 65, a. 5. This mirrors Aristotle's definition of *philia* as 'a sort of virtue' in *NE* 1155ª3.

[70] Moltmann, 'Covenant or Leviathan?', 34.

[71] Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, translated by George Collins (Verso, 2005), esp. chaps. 2–3. See also Catherine Pickstock, 'The Role of Affinity and Asymmetry in Plato's *Lysis*', *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 81, no. 1 (2020): 10-11; Sandra Lynch, 'Aristotle and Derrida on Friendship', *Contretemps* 3 (2002): 103.

rejecting these relational properties, Moltmann can also be said to reject genuine freedom and equality.

We are now in a position to summarise the ways in which friendship changed in the turn from Old to New Political Theology. For Old Political Theology, enmity is taken to be the fundamental political reality. Moltmann's New Political Theology seeks to cut friendship loose from the friend-enemy distinction and strip it of its classical and Aristotelian features—in particular reciprocity, obligations, and idealism—turning it into *agape*. According to Moltmann, these relational properties close off the possibility of friendship with the other, producing an us-versus-them dynamic based on particularity and exclusivity. The corresponding fatal flaw in Moltmann's account of open friendship is that it is unable to account for friendship as a relation of sharing, commitment, and purpose. Without this kind of relation, there can be neither political nor Christian community. Thus, whereas Schmitt reduces friendship to enmity, Moltmann dissolves friendship *qua* friendship. I shall therefore turn to de Graaff's *Politics in Friendship*.[72]

Section Three: De Graaff and Friendship as Para-Political

Guido de Graaff wants to understand the politics 'of and in' friendship, and specifically Christian friendship, as well as the political significances of such friendship.[73] Like Moltmann, de Graaff contends that a theological appreciation of these matters must be grounded in the constitutive relationship of the church, namely Jesus' gift of friendship to the disciples in John 15. This friendship is sacrificial; Jesus offers up his body for us, and we become his friends by submitting to this body and serving as its limbs.[74] Unlike Moltmann, however, for de Graaff *agape* does not replace *philia*. There is rather reconciliation of *philia* with *agape*; reciprocity and obligation with freedom; intimacy and particularity with universality; and, presumably, hierarchy with equality.[75] The Augustinian idea is that such reconciliation makes possible not only genuine friendship between humans and God, but among humans as well.

Christian friendship also makes it possible to conceive of a divine kind of judgement, de Graaff reckons, which is made manifest in the practice of forgiveness and

[72] Notably, like Moltmann, de Graaff is situated in a Reformed theological tradition. In a different study, it would be interesting to consider this situatedness in greater detail, for instance by examining Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, and especially Barth's distinction between the commandments to love God and neighbour. For Barth, loving our neighbour is a divine *commandment* which therefore represents something unnatural for postlapsarian humans. Loving our neighbour is a benefactory 'event' rather than relation, and the true gift of our neighbour is to reveal to us that we are sinners and can only be redeemed by God, not to e.g. offer the possibility for community. This contrasts interestingly with important tendencies and perspectives in Catholic theology, historic (see footnote 46 above) as well as contemporary (e.g. Pope Benedict XVI's *Deus Caritas Est* and *Caritas in Veritate*; Pope Francis' *Fratelli Tutti*). Thomas Heilke has for instance made the case that Martin Luther instrumentalised friendship among humans, and that John Calvin subordinated it to law and duty, which undermine the theological significance of friendship, and specifically civic friendship. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Vol. I., Part 2, The Doctrine of the Word of God*, translated by G. W. Bromiley, edited by T. F. Torrance, (T&T Clark International, 2004), 409ff., 414-16, 420-21, 430; Thomas Heilke, 'Friendship in the Civic Order: A Reformation Absence', in *Friendship and Politics: Essays in Political Thought*, edited by Richard Avramenko and John von Heyking (University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 163-93.

[73] De Graaff, *Politics in Friendship*, 2.

[74] Ibid., 153-64. The disciples, de Graaff notes, hopes that friendship with Jesus Christ will make them great and bestow upon them power; Jesus comments that it 'will not be so among you', for according to Christ's logic of submission, the great exercise power by serving (see Matthew 20:25-28; Mark 10:42-45). See also ibid., 164-72.

[75] See also Meilaender, *Friendship*, 36-67, esp. 65.

hospitality. This judgement is not enforced on members externally, but operates internal to the body of Christ, and thus among its members. The church can therefore 'enter a realm beyond the strictures and limitations of secular judgement' wherein it can begin 'to fulfil, through these practices, the very righteousness that secular judgement is ultimately (if perhaps unwittingly) aiming for'.[76] Such partial fulfilment is eschatological: the church is governed by the 'rule of Christ' which should only 'function alongside, in support of, or even as the beginning of political dynamics and processes'.[77] By acting as a trailblazer, the church is called 'to point towards and anticipate what society (including the life of friendship) will one day be', and model how it will function.[78] Thus, for de Graaff, friendship in the church is not political, but para-political.[79]

It is worth lingering on this distinction between the political and the para-political. De Graaff proposes an Arendtian tripartite differentiation, by which the private and private-public, or social, can be clearly and robustly distinguished from that which is public in a *political* sense. As a para-political concept, friendship is located in the overlapping spheres of the private and public, but it cannot enter the political sphere.[80] Para-political friendship nevertheless has potential for political significance insofar as the friends share a conception of the good of society as a whole, including the political sphere, and to the extent that they care for one another's good as citizens of that society.[81] This potential is only fully actualised in the 'superabundant' friendship of Christ, offered to us in the church.[82] If friendships are transformed in and by Christ, then Christian friendships can draw 'human political acts and practices into a sphere where they can participate in God's redemptive action in fallen creation'.[83]

As indicated, de Graaff's para-political friendship can be regarded as a refined variant of Moltmann's open friendship. We sense that, whereas Moltmann wants to awaken the political consciousness of theology, de Graaff also wants to awaken the theological consciousness of politics. Still, de Graaff is adamant that friendship is the centre of *theology*, not politics. In other words, friendship pertains to the religious and ethical life of the Christian communities *qua* eschatological, and not to political communities *qua* temporal. This strict separation reinforces the Moltmannian wedge between Aristotle and Augustine. A critical examination of de Graaff's dichotomy is thus warranted.

De Graaff defines friendship as 'a relationship based on mutual affection that involves two or more people'.[84] It appears that this is a reformulation of Aristotle's definition of friendship as found in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, possibly alluding to Matthew 18:20.[85] However, without further explanation, de Graaff exchanges Aristotle's mutual 'goodwill' with mutual 'affection'. These terms are related, to be sure, but their

[76] De Graaff, *Politics in Friendship*, 151-52. De Graaff reckons that such judgement is found in mutual dependence and empowerment, both of which are aspects of friendship. See ibid., sections I and II.

[77] Ibid., 203, 201.

[78] Ibid. Here, de Graaff uses O'Donovan's idea that the church's calling is to reveal 'the final form of human society', *Ways of Judgement*, 240.

[79] This concept aligns with O'Donovan's notion of the 'counter-political', *Ways of Judgement*, 292.

[80] De Graaff, *Politics in Friendship*, 29.

[81] Ibid., 32.

[82] Ibid., 203.

[83] Ibid.

[84] Ibid., 13.

[85] *NE* 1156^{a}4–5.

meanings are not the same: goodwill is necessarily ordered to the good, whereas affection (if not further specified) is not. In the passage in the *Nicomachean Ethics* where friendship is defined as mutual goodwill, Aristotle explicitly describes goodwill as wishing each other's good.

One might regard de Graaff's substitution of 'goodwill' with 'affection' as simply the result of hasty exegesis or a careless elision. The reformulation is, after all, presented in de Graaff's introduction as a provisional and loose definition. Indeed, he does go on to describe para-political friendship as something that involves common judgement materialising in common acts and practices, which, in turn, are entangled with common goods.[86] Those caveats notwithstanding, de Graaff's reformulation effectively obscures the connection between friendship and common goods. For Aristotle, the shared recognition and pursuit of goods, by which these goods are made common, is essential to and constitutive of friendship.[87] As we shall see, a great deal hinges on this connection between friendship and common goods. Indeed, de Graaff's exchange of 'goodwill' with 'affection' mimics a historical shift, from a classical and Aristotelian conceptualisation of friendship, by which friendship is also rational and political, to a modern conceptualisation, where these aspects have been eliminated.[88] Friendship is now widely seen as a particular, affectionate, and private-*cum*-public relation.

A similar shift is evident in de Graaff's understanding of politics, which he defines as the 'process involved in the task of government, and, by derivation, those processes that contribute to that task'.[89] In other words, for de Graaff politics is a specific set of actions within temporal society, uniquely devoted to the provision of justice, prosecuted typically via the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. Given that de Graaff identifies 'politics' with the centralised apparatus of law, authority, and administration, the agency which enacts that apparatus is presumably the nation-state. This compartmentalisation of politics suggests that while humans may well be social by nature, we are not *political* by nature. In effect, this limitation of the sphere of politics to the operations by a centralised apparatus of law, authority, and administration legitimises setting aside the political realm as a reserve of an elite.[90]

Furthermore, de Graaff seems to assume that justice is reducible to that which Aristotle characterises as partial justice. Such partial justice concerns institutionalised distribution of burdens and benefits. If we add to this a catalogue of human rights, then we have the standard understanding of justice in modernity and specifically liberalism—namely justice as fairness. However, as the label suggests, for Aristotle partial justice is only *part* of justice. Complete justice concerns the entire character of the citizens, the fullness of virtue, which seems to culminate in friendship.[91] Fairness can therefore only be just insofar as it contributes to virtue and friendship. If fairness, as a part of complete justice, is detached and treated as if it were the whole of justice, it runs

[86] Ref. de Graaff, *Politics in Friendship*, 32.

[87] This understanding is for instance presented in Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, third edition (University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), chap. 12.

[88] See MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 156.

[89] De Graaff, *Politics in Friendship*, 17.

[90] Yet citizens should, according to de Graaff, act politically without becoming politicians, for instance by conforming to the legal codes via day-to-day law-abiding behaviour.

[91] Similarly, Daniel Schwartz observes that for Aquinas justice 'is the means through which we can restore a friendship that has been damaged by the perpetration of wrongful acts', *Aquinas on Friendship* (Clarendon Press, 2007), 164. See also ibid., 123-40.

the risk of distortion and devolution in slow and strange ways, possibly, over time, undermining the whole from which it derives.[92]

Since Aristotle serves as de Graaff's entry into friendship in politics, or politics in friendship, and given that Aristotle makes a profound connection between justice, virtue, and friendship,[93] we would expect some kind of discussion of the reasons for restricting justice to partial justice.[94] De Graaff says that the classical 'idealism'—that is, presumably, virtue culminating in friendship—poses a danger to our understanding of the significance of the relationship between friendship and politics, which as we have seen is construed in terms of the para-political.[95] But that fear is only reasonable if one grants two presuppositions. First, that justice is already only ever partial, that there *can* be genuine justice without virtue and friendship, and that virtue and friendship should be taken to be para-political rather than political. Second, that friendship 'has a more restricted locality compared to politics; friendship is where friends are, whereas politics pervades [temporal] society'.[96]

The first presupposition is tantamount to assuming the conclusion de Graaff argues for. The second challenges de Graaff's assumption that the private-public spheres can be clearly and robustly distinguished from the political sphere. If politics pervades the private and public spheres, then it seems that friendship cannot be kept out of politics. De Graaff might concede this second criticism, and retort that the important point is that the locality of politics is *different* from that of friendship. But this difference is simply asserted, which again would be tantamount to assuming the conclusion that friendship is not political.

This circularity rests on a further presupposition, closely connected to the second, and already pointed out, about the nature of friendship. On de Graaff's account, it is futile to construe civic relations in terms of a political type of friendship because such an application of 'friendship' would not correspond to friendship in the 'ordinary sense'.[97] It is 'from the perspective of friendship simpliciter'—that is, friendship in this 'ordinary sense'—that we can analyse 'the specific dynamics, acts, and practices on account of which friendship might be said to involve politics'.[98] We should therefore enquire: whose is that 'ordinary sense' of friendship? And *which* ordinary sense, precisely?

Presumably, de Graaff has in mind the modern conception of friendship as a particular, affectionate, and private-*cum*-public relation. If friendship is per definition restricted to the particular, affectionate, and private-*cum*-public, *pace* Aristotle and the Aristotelians, then certainly friendship is not appropriate to represent the political relation, which is to say the bond that binds humans together in political community. But de Graaff fails to consider whether this ordinary sense of friendship represents a good conception of friendship. In short, he fails to engage in the Aristotelian exercise of considering phenomena as they appear to us compared to their actual nature.

[92] A biblical example might perhaps be found in Jesus's cleansing of the temple: the laws and regulations, which originate in God's commandments, did not serve their purpose of divine redemption, of communicating reconciliation and forgiveness to the people, i.e., friendship—they had collapsed to a transactional system of moneymaking by which people and foreigners alike were exploited (see John 2:13-17).

[93] *NE* 1157^{a}27–29.

[94] Cf. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 155.

[95] De Graaff, *Politics in Friendship*, 17-19; 23.

[96] Ibid., 18.

[97] Ibid., 20.

[98] Ibid., 20. See also 21.

All philosophical enquiries must start from somewhere. But de Graaff's point of departure is problematic in that it rushes through consequential junctures, setting the enquiry off into a direction where the political order of modernity, the liberal nation-state, remains essentially unchallenged. Friendship, for de Graaff, is simply assumed to be a corrective to modern politics. As such, it is incapable of offering the basis of an alternative political community with an alternative politics. This approach is justified in Moltmannian fashion, by critiquing an Aristotelian caricature, and taking for granted that the Augustinian tradition is inimical to that of Aristotle, and specifically Aquinas: 'whereas the Thomistic tradition sees a continuum between the desires, goals and governing principles of the earthly and heavenly communities respectively, the Augustinian tradition sees a discontinuity and even conflict'.[99] This approach crystalises in de Graaff's engagement with Gilbert Meilaender, to whose work we now turn.

Section Four: Gilbert Meilaender and the Idolatry of Civic Friendship

In his book *Friendship*, Meilaender presents three criticisms against the ideal of civic friendship.[100] First, it is impractical and unrealisable, and thus irrelevant, especially if the ideal is Aristotelian and located in a 'participatory-communal' political community.[101] These political communities were historically unstable arrangements, and the conditions which would have achieved their ideal form, and thus perhaps stability, were extraordinarily rare. Moreover, the Aristotelian ideal is fundamentally at odds with the political order in which we currently find ourselves, based as it is on individuality rather than community. Meilaender thus assumes that the political order of modernity, namely liberalism, is not only justified, but also self-evidently superior to participatory-communal political communities.

Second, for Meilaender the ideal of civic friendship is 'incoherent'.[102] The ideal conflates two spheres that ought to be kept apart: on the one hand, associations of love in which people share individual interests, and on the other, the political community that serves the common good. Whereas friendship occurs in and is appropriate to associations of love and affection, the political community exists to provide justice *qua* proper adjudication between the various and often conflicting interests of individual citizens, including friends, from a strictly impersonal and disinterested perspective. In other words, friendship is a bond imbued by special interest, by exclusivity and particularity, and is thus contrary to justice. The ideal of 'civic friendship' amounts to a category mistake in that it involves the projection of a private relationship onto the political. Friendship must therefore be kept out of the political sphere; if it is, then justice will advance friendship, for it provides a befitting relational ground upon which friendships can be built.

Third, the ideal is 'essentially pagan', manifesting 'inordinate and idolatrous love'.[103] By contrast, Christian friendship—though partial and interested at present—foreshadows a greater future society: the universal society of perfect love which God is realising,

[99] Ibid., 24. Cf. Luke Bretherton, 'What is Political Theology? What is Politics?', in *Christ and the Common Life: Political Theology and the Case for Democracy* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2019), 25-26.

[100] Meilaender, *Friendship*, 75. *Nota bene*: Meilaender presents four criticisms. I collapse the first two, i.e. the instability of the historic Greek city-states and the difficulty of achieving its ideal form.

[101] Ibid., 70.

[102] Ibid., 74.

[103] Ibid., 75.

and in which friendship and justice will forever be reconciled.[104] But the penultimate political community cannot realise this ultimate form of human society. To strive for civic friendship is therefore to overreach, to grasp for a universal society of perfect love prematurely. This third criticism carries the real force of Meilaender's challenge against the ideal of civic friendship.

De Graaff does not simply repeat this threefold challenge but hones it by way of his criticism of Meilaender. According to de Graaff, Meilaender's challenge is based on a night-watchman conception of the political community that, in its reductive minimalism, generates an excessively rigid separation of friendship from politics. That is, temporal society, as depicted by Meilaender, is a dualist system in which there is the private (to which friendship belongs) and the political (where justice reigns). But de Graaff, as we have seen, proposes that this system be intermediated by 'the public'. Whereas friendship belongs to the private, and justice to the political, they intermix in the public. Put differently, the common good does not only consist in justice as an instrumental good, which Meilaender suggests, but in the totality of substantial goods pursued and enjoyed in temporal society at large, which may or may not be promoted politically.[105] In this system, friendship can come to interact with the political, and vice versa, in and by the public.[106]

De Graaff maintains that this tripartite system is very much compatible with the typical insistence found in political Augustinianisms, emphasised also by Meilaender, that the political community is a temporary, albeit still divine, provision necessitated by sin.[107] But de Graaff, *pace* Meilaender, is also careful to stress that this does not prevent the political community from having the aforementioned substantive rather than merely a procedural conception of the common good (by which the common good is reduced to something like Rawlsian fairness). Otherwise the political community would be unable to recognise the common good in a broader and thicker sense, which is a prerequisite for protecting and possibly promoting it.[108]

This takes away some of the force of Meilaender's first and second challenges, the charges of irrelevance and incoherence. However, it also introduces further problems for de Graaff's account. Importantly, the content and scope of de Graaff's substantive common goods remain vague. He simply assumes that the liberal nation-state has the competence and authority to protect and promote such common goods. But why are we to believe this is the case? Alasdair MacIntyre, for instance, adamantly rejects this assumption. According to MacIntyre, the liberal nation-state is incapable of civic friendship, and for that very reason, it is unable to offer us genuinely common goods.[109] On MacIntyre's Aristotelian understanding, common goods are goods that are achieved in

[104] Ibid., 77.

[105] De Graaff, *Politics in Friendship*, 28.

[106] Ibid., 30.

[107] Ibid., 29.

[108] However, this must be a matter of 'defending' rather than 'devising' the common good, ibid. See also O'Donovan, *Ways of Judgement*, 57ff., esp. 61-62.

[109] Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Replies', *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 67, no. 264(2) (2013): 220. For MacIntyre's distinction between public and common goods, see Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Politics, Philosophy and the Common Good', in *The MacIntyre Reader*, edited by Kelvin Knight (University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 239-41; 'A Partial Response to My Critics', in *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre*, edited by John Horton and Susan Mendus (Polity Press, 1994), 303; *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Open Court, 2002), 108-9; *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 125.

and by a common recognition and pursuit of goods, which is friendship per se.[110] The achievement of specifically political common goods is therefore only possible in and by civic friendship.

Indeed, this Aristotelian understanding of friendship appears to be a relational condition for achieving genuinely common goods. If friendship, for de Graaff, *is* concerned with common goods (on the view that his exchange of 'goodwill' with 'affection' in Aristotle's definition, noted above, was in fact only an exegetical slippage), and the political community *should* be concerned with common goods, then that seems to imply that civic friendship—understood along the lines of Aristotelians and specifically Thomists like MacIntyre, as a shared recognition and pursuit of goods—is not only desirable but even necessary. We see here that de Graaff's criticism of Meilaender's night-watchman state undermines his own wedge between friendship and politics. That brings us to the third criticism, the idolatry charge, which de Graaff develops in reference to Aristotle.

De Graaff and Meilaender reckon that for Aristotelians the city-state is the highest and finest form of human community; it is complete and self-sufficient. The city-state thus directly rivals Augustine's Heavenly City. Instead of viewing existing patterns of political life against the horizon of a better world to come, Aristotle makes ultimate the penultimate political community of this present world.[111] But, according to de Graaff, Aristotle's city-state resembles a large corporation run by a small, aristocratic elite. Consider only the structure of oppression and exploitation upon which Aristotle's city-state is built—a life of philosophical leisure is impossible, for instance, without the institution of slavery. In Aristotle, therefore, de Graaff can point to a manifest example of Meilaender's worst fears: the distortive effect of friendship on justice, to the point that justice serves to sanction, from a Christian point of view, 'grave examples of injustice'.[112] De Graaff reckons that 'within a general political dynamic that is already exclusivist and oppressive, surely this Aristotelian ideal of virtuous friendship enforces that dynamic?'[113]

The question is rhetorical, but it is not at all obvious that the Aristotelian ideal of civic friendship is unable to provide the necessary corrective function: we have only been presented with a caricature of Aristotle, and thus we cannot know.[114] For instance, it could be that the problem with Aristotle's political theory is not the idea that citizens should share a common recognition and pursuit of the good, but that the good, in certain important respects, is not correctly recognised and well-pursued. Put differently, the problem is not civic friendship, but rather the lack thereof. We should therefore be sceptical about de Graaff's proposal to pay heed to 'Meilaender's warning about civic friendship'.[115]

Moreover, it is not at all evident that Aristotle's ethical and political theory necessitates structures of oppression and exploitation, even though such structures certainly were taken for granted by Aristotle.[116] Furthermore, if it does, then it is not necessarily the case that it is impossible to redeem Aristotle's concept of civic friendship from such structures. Conversely, de Graaff fails to properly consider that for Augustine politics in

[110] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 155-56.

[111] De Graaff, *Politics in Friendship*, 33.

[112] Ibid., 34.

[113] Ibid.

[114] De Graaff does present a somewhat more nuanced exegesis of Aristotle later on in the book, but then it is already too late: the terms have been defined, the bounds set, and the approach taken. See ibid., chap. 3.I.

[115] Ibid., 36.

[116] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 159. See also *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, 85ff.

the *saeculum* can be taken to be genuine participation in and an inauguration of the Heavenly City, such that there is a sense in which we really can partake in the Heavenly City here and now. And if so, might the aforementioned irreconcilable opposition between Aristotle's city-state and participation in Augustine's Heavenly City in *saeculum* be overcome? A Thomist understanding indicates this. Although there certainly are important differences between Aristotle and Augustine, the uncrossable chasm between them appears more than anything to be a postulate.

Both de Graaff and Meilaender seem to assume that personal and civic friendships are identical concepts: the latter is not compatible with justice because its features are essentially like the former. But as suggested, these should not be taken to be identical. We can take 'friendship' as a genus to be the common recognition and pursuit of goods, and civic friendship a species of this genus, that is, friendship concerning specifically *political* goods. Furthermore, de Graaff and especially Meilaender do not seem to appreciate that an ideal is an *ideal*, which by its very nature is something that is not easy or perhaps possible to realise fully between Eden and eschaton. Surely, we should not throw out the *imago Dei* if we found it to be impractical or even, in the *saeculum*, unrealisable?

The charge of idolatry can also be turned against de Graaff and Meilaender. Is not the very aspiration to be just, which for the Christian is realised in divine justice, idolatrous in the same manner that civic friendship is said to be idolatrous? According to the logic of Meilaender and de Graaff, all ideals which find their fulfilment in Christ should be criticised as idolatrous when we attempt to realise them as best as we can. That would make the 'Christian ideal' a very peculiar class of ideals: a divinely revealed aim toward which we ought not strive. Surely that would challenge Augustine's counsel to imitate Christ.[117]

To summarise, de Graaff's account represents an important improvement of Moltmann (and Meilaender), seemingly exhausting the possibilities for friendship in the new political theologies. Specifically, de Graaff proposes the reconciliation of *philia* with *agape*, such that friendship can come to serve as an eschatological corrective to modern politics. This makes us appreciate the sacrificial core of Christian *philia*, and that such Christian *philia* should be characteristic of Christian communities. But de Graaff's account is undermined by a number of serious issues. One set of issues concerns the presupposition that friendship is essentially non-political, effectively reducing justice to fairness, and that politics is essentially concerned with restraining sin, such that the political community is rendered intrinsically temporal. These presuppositions amount to a *de facto* liberal political theory. Simultaneously, however, de Graaff attempts to couple this liberal political theory with substantial common goods. But we have reasons to believe that this coupling is not only difficult to achieve, but even impossible—for it requires a common recognition and pursuit of such goods, which just is the rejected Aristotelian understanding of civic friendship.[118]

[117] See *Jo. ev. tr*. 25.16.

[118] It should also be noted, as Matthew Ryan Robinson does, that de Graaff scarcely reflects on the possibility for para-political friendship in a situation where there is broad and deep, perhaps deepening, conflicts about the correct conception of the good life for humans (and thus substantial common goods). De Graaff simply assumes that there is sufficient agreement. There is a certain kind of blindness here, which is made evident in the case study de Graaff uses to explore the political significance of friendship: resistance against the Schmittian totalitarianism that produced the Holocaust. From our position in history, we look back at this period and see good and evil as manifest qualities and quantities, easily delineated from one another. Yet there is no such unanimous perspective on good and evil in our own society. Although we must continuously remember the Holocaust, it can also make us blind to and removed from the specific problems that need resolving in our time—rendering us unable to adequately grapple with them. See Matthew Ryan Robinson, 'Politics in Friendship: A Theological Account', *Political Theology* 18, no. 2 (2017): 179.

Section Five: From New Political Theologies to Modern Political Thomism

In examining the friendship accounts of Moltmann, de Graaff, and Meilaender, we have brought to the fore fundamental disagreements between Aristotelian and Augustinian modes of political theorisation. These disagreements can be said to revolve around the relationship between the *saeculum* and the eschaton. According to Moltmann, de Graaff, and Meilaender, we must see political and Christian communities from the perspective of the eschaton. From that vantage, we recognise that it is only God that can fully inaugurate the genuine (or true or real) 'political community', namely the kingdom of God, the new Jerusalem, the Heavenly City. This perspective implies fixed and rigid constraints as to what the political community can be in the *saeculum*. In the old political theologies, there are no such constraints, or, at the very least, they are vastly laxer. Consequently, the old political theologies attempt to control or achieve that which is per se beyond the reach of political community: completion and self-sufficiency. For the new political theologies, this is tantamount to secularising or temporalising—or, in Voegelinian parlance, immanentising—the eschaton.

Then again, ours is a penultimate time in-between the first and second coming of Christ the King. We have been bestowed revelations about ultimate political truths and realities. We must steward this revelatory deposit well; we cannot bury our treasures in the ground and hope that the King will be satisfied with us. And our crown jewel is the revelation that Christian communities can inaugurate, even in the *saeculum*, the kingdom of God. This inauguration both subverts political communities in the *saeculum*, and, with the fulfilment of the kingdom, completes them: the kingdom of God is alone self-sufficient.

However, according to the new political theologies, the kingdom of God is not political. Christian communities subvert and complete political communities by rendering politics redundant. It is against this eschatological horizon that we see the vanity of civic friendship for the new political theologies: it idealises a dimension of human sociability—the political—that only serves as a temporal remedy for sin.[119] Thus, according to the new political theologies, proponents of civic friendship eschatologise intrinsically temporal relations, which is to commit a category mistake. For them, the political community can only ever hope to restrain anti-friendship, so that para-political friendship can grow and blossom in Christian communities.

Although this criticism is insightful, the new political theologies also suffer, as we have seen, from serious conceptual problems. The basic problem is the postulation of a *de facto* liberal political theory where, on the one hand, justice is taken to be inimical to friendship and, on the other, politics is understood to be an intrinsically secular or temporal exercise. These presuppositions produce a fallacy of equivocation. In the new political theologies, the 'political community' (in modernity) is equivocated with 'the nation-state'. This, in turn, entraps the political imagination of the new political theologies within the strictures and limitations of the nation-state. According to the new

[119] O'Donovan's *Ways of Judgement* is a case in point: the authority of political community 'resides essentially in the act of judgement'. According to O'Donovan, this is the only 'political function' that remains in the *saeculum*; all other political-like functions belong to the kingdom of God. But this kingdom is not really political, it is 'post-political', mirroring the 'pre-political' Eden. And political judgement is just a 'parentheses between the two, an interim service'. The church, in this schema, can assist the political community by promoting the goods that the political community protects, but it is intrinsically 'counter-political', it unsettles and critiques from beyond the political, that is, the eschaton. And since the political community is temporal, even this function will come to an end with the end of times. See O'Donovan, *Ways of Judgement*, 4; 238-40; 292; 319.

political theologies, the nation-state, if liberal and restrained by the critical witness of Chrisian communities, securely chains the Leviathans of the old political theologies. But this very liberalism, and its coupling of nation-state and market, although hypothetically restrained by the critical witness, is itself—to use a MacIntyrean description—'a new, if often sickly, Leviathan'.[120] Put differently, conflating the political community with the nation-state renders the new political theologies insufficiently attentive to the fact that the nation-state is an amphisbaena, a two-headed serpent of modernity: an authoritarian head is roaring in front, and a liberal head hiding cunningly in the back.

How can this amphisbaena be resisted? MacIntyre suggests that resistance is only possible from the margins of the nation-state. The point is not that the liberal nation-state is without value.[121] The point, rather, is that the liberal nation-state is not legitimate *qua* political community, and thus that modern politics represents a distortion of politics. Voting every fourth year or so and having opinions about taxation and transgender rights is not an adequate realisation of our political nature. Here it is important to stress that it does not follow from the fact that the nation-state is a counterfeit (or phantom or *ersatz*) political community, that it is impossible to create and sustain genuine political communities in the *saeculum*. Finally, if we assume that humans are political by nature—which the new political theologies might not accept, for reasons that are not entirely evident, if we disregard the assumption that politics is inherently secular or temporal—then the function of genuine political community cannot be essentially negative. Sin necessitates the negative function. But granted that the postlapsarian predicament is secular or temporal, the essential function of genuine politics must be positive: achieving completeness and self-sufficiency in human relations.

On this understanding, the principal business of political theology concerns the positive function, and only derivatively the negative function: under different social and cultural structures, how can the positive function of politics be achieved, granted a theological understanding of our nature (or identity) and history (or destiny) as humans? Answering that question would require political theologians to heed the ambiguities of the term 'politics' and to attempt to differentiate the counterfeit 'politics' that is displayed in the combative spectacle and managerialism of the liberal nation-state from *genuine* politics.[122] Critical and creative enquiries must go hand-in-hand: what is genuine politics?

Where can it be found, and how do we exercise it? How can we actualise our political potential, and in what kind of communities? These questions can only be satisfactorily answered if we also engage in a philosophical anthropology, which in turn requires

[120] MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, 124.

[121] Ref. ibid., 125.

[122] Bretherton's distinctions between different approaches to 'politics' in political theology is a resource for reflecting on such ambiguities, but it also displays the inadequacies of contemporary political theology. Like de Graaff, Bretherton suggests that the nation-state is 'a providential necessity for restraining evil and sustaining forms of common life' amidst 'competing visions of the good'. But how is such common life possible? What does this common life consist in if there is disagreement about the good? An interesting example is Bretherton's refusal to divide people in 'goodies' and 'baddies' (for otherwise, presumably, a common life despite competing visions of the good will not be possible). Yet Bretherton also labels opponents—people as it were more-*right*-than-liberal—as 'clearly on an antidemocratic path' (without providing any precise references to support this kind of claim), that is, on a path away from the common life as defined presumably in terms of Bretherton's conception of the good. See Bretherton, 'Looking to the Future', 208; Bretherton, Lloyd, and Napolitano, 'Introduction: Trajectories in Politiacl Theology', 1-2; 234 n2; Luke Bretherton, 'Political Theology as Testimony', in *What is Political Theology?* (Columbia University Press, 2026) 56-81; 85-6.

involvement with metaphysics and theology. Yet the new political theologies we have considered tend to distance us from such modes of thinking and living. They do so by emphasising the aforementioned 'discontinuity and even conflict' between the desires, goals, and principles of humanity in its temporal incompletion—to the exclusion of attending to the ways humans are drawn toward, and can move in the direction of, their eschatological completion as a perfection of human nature.

The alleged discontinuity and conflict would undermine the vocation of the Christian communities—namely, to be an intelligible critical witness to the kingdom of God. For if there is discontinuity and conflict, then how can the witness of para-political friendships be meaningfully communicated to the political community? Irrespective of communicability, would the witness be at all relevant for the political community *qua* political? Indeed, would not the para-political friendship, still within the *saeculum*, itself be prevented from its eschatological fulfilment by the discontinuity and conflict endemic to the political community, rendering all striving for the ideal, for perfection, meaningless?

On Moltmann's telling, Pontius Pilate is the only politician in the Christian confession. But clearly that is not the case. Jesus Christ reigns as Lord God, both Friend and King at once.[123] Indeed, by reciprocally interpreting the office of kingship in terms of friendship and *vice versa*, we recognise that civic friendship must be the basic bond of God's kingdom. Chosen to be Christ's friends, the Christian community must therefore enquire into the manner by which this reign can be extended into alternative genuine political communities in the *saeculum*. That is, the Church must exist alongside the nation-state, not as a 'counter-politics' in the sense of being against politics. Rather, the Church must be a 'counter-politics' in the sense of offering the proper realm for alternative genuine political communities.[124] This difference is paramount. For creating and sustaining such alternative genuine political communities is a demanding enterprise. And if political theology is, principally, a certain mode of critiquing, of judging, then we are distracted and removed from imagining and realising such alternatives, from participation in our ultimate destiny as humans, and thus understanding our basic identity.

In conclusion, I want to suggest that the civic friendship lacuna indicates where there might be space for such an alternative approach to political theology. This space is *Thomistic* in the sense that it is based on the synthesis of Aristotelianism and Augustinianism in the tradition of Aquinas.[125] It is a *modern* political Thomism in the sense that it resists both the authoritarianism of old political theologies, and the liberalism of new political theologies—that is, it resists the conceptualisation of the political relation as either closed or open 'friendship'. Such resistance is but a precondition for realising our political nature in the *saeculum*, and specifically under the conditions of the liberal nation-state. Only by engaging in alternative political thinking and living *for its own sake*—which means to recognise and pursue the good in common with specific groups of people at particular places—can Christians serve as convincing and critical witnesses to the modern world and its nation-states.

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[123] Moltmann, 'European Political Theology', 10.

[124] For examples of this kind of approach, see e.g. Andrew Willard Jones, D. C. Schindler, William T. Cavanaugh.

[125] This involves, presumably, to enter into conversations with and about the classical texts of Thomism, and thus a Thomist tradition itself. In that sense, 'Thomistic' should perhaps be taken to roughly map onto Daniel De Haan's taxonomy in 'The Sapiential Task of the Thomist Tradition: To Enlarge and Perfect the Old by Way of the New', *New Blackfriars* (2025): 7.

The friendship lacuna that I have examined and analysed in this article point toward one way that this space can be developed: centring on civic friendship. Perhaps the pathway proposed by Andrew Willard Jones—a pioneer of modern political Thomism—seems promising. He contends precisely that 'friendship is the fundamental political reality'.[126] Unfortunately, although offering interesting and valuable perspectives on friendship and politics,[127] and especially on the positive function of politics, Willard Jones does not advance the kind of groundwork pertaining to friendship that modern political Thomism requires.[128] We are still left with the question, what does it mean that friendship is the fundamental political reality, and specifically in modernity and under the conditions of the liberal nation-state? And how can such friendship avoid collapsing into Schmitt's authoritarianism, or Moltmann's liberalism? These are challenges with which modern political Thomists must grapple.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

[126] Andrew Willard Jones, *The Church Against the State: On Subsidiarity and Sovereignty* (New Polity Press, 2025), 9. See also ibid., 251.

[127] Ibid., 3-28; 90ff; 250-62.

[128] Willard Jones connects for instance friendship in interesting ways to subsidiarity as the form of the common good. And he also says that, politically speaking, we must 'start playing a different game' (ibid., 27). We must 'identify where structures of friendship still exist' and then 'cultivate them and expand them' (ibid.). But this is only possible if we have a firm grasp about the meaning of friendship and its connection to politics.