

# The President's Theodicy: An American Theo-Drama The Problem of Evil

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## **Abstract**

It has often been noted that that the form of contemporary political life is deeply rooted in the tradition of political theology, and that the inheritance of a theologico-political grammar is responsible for the theo-dramatic structure of contemporary politics. Using Barack Obama's 2009 Nobel Prize lecture as my example, I argue that Obama relies upon a theologico-political grammar to construct a theodicy for American empire.

*"There never was a golden age. There is no point in looking back to one. The first man was immediately the first sinner."*

-Karl Barth<sup>1</sup>

*"War in one form or another appeared with the first man."*

-Barack Obama<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, pt, translated by G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956), 508.

<sup>2</sup> "Nobel Lecture by Barack H. Obama, Oslo, 10 December 2009." Nobelprize.org.

[https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/2009/obama-lecture\\_en.html](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2009/obama-lecture_en.html), accessed January 1, 2018.

We sometimes like to tell ourselves that politics is simply a matter of looking at the current political landscape, diagnosing problems, suggesting solutions, and then taking steps to implement those solutions as policy. Contrary to this vision, it is important recognize that politics relies on narrative. It has often been noted that that the form of contemporary political life is deeply rooted in the tradition of political theology, and that the inheritance of a theologico-political grammar is responsible for the theo-dramatic structure of contemporary politics.<sup>3</sup> In this essay, I discuss what Adam Kotsko considers the four paradigms of political theology—Deuteronomist, prophetic, apocalyptic, and katechonic—and the relation among these paradigms and contemporary politics. While the four paradigms are all interconnected, I contend, following Kotsko, that the katechonic paradigm persists into the present. Using Barack Obama’s 2009 Nobel Prize lecture as my example, I argue that Obama appeals to the katechonic paradigm, in addition to the redemptive power of the United States, in order to construct a theodicy for American empire. If the former president of the United States can unknowingly make use of theologico-political tropes, then the history of political theology is still a history worth contending with.

### ***Obama’s Nobel Prize speech***

Barack Obama was awarded the Nobel Prize in 2009. This was controversial, because he was the president and commander-in-chief of the world’s largest imperial power. How can someone win the Nobel *peace* prize while being the commander-in-chief of the world’s largest military? Obama was aware of this problem. In his Nobel Prize lecture, he admits that “perhaps the most profound issue surrounding my receipt of this prize is the fact that I am the

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<sup>3</sup> On the idea of Theo-Drama, see: Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol.1: *Prolegomena*, Translated by Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988).

commander-in-chief of a nation in the midst of two wars.”<sup>4</sup> Why did Obama accept the award, if he understood this problem? He could have declared that he is not fit to take the award, due to his involvement in two wars. But that was not the route that he took. Obama accepted the award, and to justify his reception of the award he turned to theodicy. Obama’s theodicy is summarized when he says “some will kill. Some will be killed.”<sup>5</sup> Obama suggests that violence is both inevitable and primordial because “war in one form or another, appeared with the first man.”<sup>6</sup> Obama enters theological territory by speculating on the origins of war, and asserting that it starts with the “first man.” For Obama, warfare has been our condition since “the dawn of history.”<sup>7</sup> War happens prior to any conceptualization of war or any attempt to mitigate it. War comes first, and philosophies of warfare are put in place to regulate it.

### ***A History of Theodicy and Political Theology***

For Kotsko, the existence of evil is the initiator of political theology.<sup>8</sup> The turning point in political theology is the Babylonian Exile, in which the Israelites were taken captive and displaced. The central question throughout the Exile was, “How could the God of Israel allow this to happen?” The theological reflections produced during the time of exile, reached the conclusion that the God of Israel is in fact God of the whole world, and thus has control over history. If God has control over history, then the suffering of the Israelites can fit within a narrative of divine providence. God’s relation to history is

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<sup>4</sup> Obama, *Nobel Lecture*.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Adam Kotsko, “The Problem of Evil and The Problem of Legitimacy: On the Roots and Future of Political Theology,” *Crisis and Critique* 2:1 (2015): 285-99.

accounted for within the four theologico-political paradigms that Kotsko outlines.

The Deuteronomistic paradigm is the first of the four, and it appears in the Deuteronomistic books of the Hebrew Bible (Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, and Jeremiah). The paradigm can be summarized with Deuteronomy 11:26-28, "See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today; and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn from the way that I am commanding you today, to follow other gods that you have not known."<sup>9</sup> This passage functions as an answer to the problem of evil. We are blessed when we obey God's law, and cursed when we do not. As Kotsko puts it, "their solution preserved faith in God by claiming that the apparent evils they suffered were not truly evils, but were instead well-deserved punishments aimed at putting people back on track."<sup>10</sup> Under this paradigm, God is the author of the law and the lawgiver, and for this reason, there is no easy homology between God and the earthly ruler. At any moment, the earthly ruler can become God's rival, as the earthly ruler is not necessarily obedient to God's command.<sup>11</sup>

In another part of Deuteronomy, the author is excited about the possibility of a righteous earthly ruler, but Kotsko notes that in the other texts within the Deuteronomist tradition, such as Joshua, Judges, and first and Second Samuel, a more pessimistic stance is assumed. In 1 Samuel 8:11-18, God responds to the Israelites desire for an earthly ruler by stating all the ways the King will be

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<sup>9</sup> All biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

unjust to the people.<sup>12</sup> For the author of Samuel, it is preferable to be under the direct kingship of God than to be under an earthly ruler. The rivalry between God and the earthly ruler, as presented in 1 Samuel, makes it clear that, “the fate of Israel hangs on whether the king is a divine functionary within God’s rule or a rival to the theocratic ideal.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, God and the earthly ruler can converge or diverge, and there is no necessary unity between them. In most cases, they are in an antagonistic relationship.

The Prophetic paradigm is an intensification of the Deuteronomistic paradigm. This intensification happens with the Hebrew prophets, who living in exile, must account for how the Israelite kingdoms were defeated. The pagan ruler is taken to be an instrument of God, punishing the Israelites for their disobedience. Once the King’s God-appointed task is done, God will punish them for their injustice and sinfulness.<sup>14</sup> As an example, Kotsko cites Jeremiah 25:8-14, in which God declares King Nebuchadnezzar his servant, for the task of punishing the Israelites, and once that is over, God will punish

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<sup>12</sup> “These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day.” (1 Samuel 8:11-18)

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

King Nebuchadnezzar.<sup>15</sup> The prophetic paradigm is specifically tailored to the experience of exile. It was a response to the question of how the Israelites ought to *live* under a pagan ruler, “the Jews are encouraged to suspend judgment of the pagan rulers under whom they must live. God will judge in his own due time and until then, the duty of the Jewish community is to be as faithful as possible to the law and to contribute positively to the surrounding community.”<sup>16</sup> This position is also stated in Jeremiah 29:7, “But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

The prophetic paradigm eventually became the norm, but a new paradigm emerged in a situation of extreme suffering. The apocalyptic paradigm emerges under intense historical conditions, such as the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes, the Greek ruler who tried to force Hellenism upon the Jews, by defiling the temple and forcing

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<sup>15</sup> “Therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts: Because you have not obeyed my words, I am going to send for all the tribes of the north, says the Lord, even for King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, my servant, and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants, and against all these nations around; I will utterly destroy them, and make them an object of horror and of hissing, and an everlasting disgrace. And I will banish from them the sound of mirth and the sound of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the sound of the millstones and the light of the lamp. This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, says the Lord, making the land an everlasting waste. I will bring upon that land all the words that I have uttered against it, everything written in this book, which Jeremiah prophesied against all the nations. For many nations and great kings shall make slaves of them also; and I will repay them according to their deeds and the work of their hands.” (Jeremiah 25:8-14)

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 288.

the Jews to eat pork.<sup>17</sup> The reign of Antiochus Epiphanes is simply incomprehensible within both the Deuteronomistic and prophetic paradigms, because for the first time, the Jews were punished for *obeying* the law.<sup>18</sup> Under these conditions, the earthly ruler cannot be God's servant, and is figured as the representative of cosmic evil. With that being the case, the apocalyptic paradigm is still in continuity with the other paradigms because, "Even the king conceived as demonic plays a necessary role in God's plan, as he serves as God's final enemy, whose defeat ushers in the messianic age."<sup>19</sup>

The apocalyptic paradigm appears throughout the New Testament. In the New Testament, especially the synoptic gospels, the world is held captive by Satan. For instance, In the gospel of Matthew, Satan offers Jesus all the kingdoms of the earth, in exchange for Jesus' devotion (Matthew 4:8-9). The author of Matthew makes it clear that Satan has *real* power over the rulers of the world. The earthly rulers are in the hands of Satan and thus not operating as (direct) instruments of God.<sup>20</sup> The apocalyptic paradigm stresses the distinction between the righteousness and Justice of God, and the wickedness of the earthly powers and authority. It also emphasizes the spiritual nature of the earthly rulers, "For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 289.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 290.

<sup>21</sup> (Ephesians 6:12). The letter to the Galatians is an important text to consider, when discussing the apocalyptic paradigm. A full treatment of Galatians is beyond the scope of this essay. For a ground-breaking treatment of Galatians, see: J. Louis Martyn, "The Apocalyptic Gospel in Galatians," *Interpretations* 54, 3 (2000): 246-66.

Kotsko points to the Book of Revelation, and its depiction of the Roman authorities as the enemies of God, as another example of the apocalyptic paradigm. The idea that the political authorities are the enemies of God presents the political significance of the call for the kingdom of God. The call for the kingdom of God exemplifies the intensification of the rivalry between God and the earthly ruler that is established in 1 Samuel 8:11-18.

In the New Testament, the apocalyptic paradigm is closely tied to the imminent expectation of the final judgment (apocalypse), when God will usher in the kingdom and deliver justice. Jesus predicted that the messiah would return within the lifetime of his followers (Mark 13:29-31). The messiah did not return within the lifetime of his followers, and I contend that the non-arrival of the messiah, forced a mutation of the apocalyptic paradigm. If the time between the resurrection of Jesus (the event that confirms his identity as messiah) and the final judgment is longer than expected, then how is the temporal shift accounted for? The urgency of the apocalyptic paradigm is toned down significantly, and elements of the prophetic paradigm reappear. There is an earthly ruler, who can be used as a tool of God, but in a negative sense. Not to deliver judgment upon God's people, but to keep things in order, before the coming of the antichrist/the end of time. The figure who is called upon to hold back the coming of the antichrist is the '*katechon*' (the one who restrains).

The *katechon* is first mentioned in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-8.<sup>22</sup> The figure of the *katechon*, later serves as justification for Christian

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<sup>22</sup> "Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction. He opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God. Do you not remember that I told you these things when I was still with you? And you know what is now restraining him, so that he may be revealed when his time comes. For the mystery of



empire. Given that the coming of the messiah has been delayed indefinitely, Christian rulers can maintain order between now and the end of time.<sup>23</sup> The katechonic paradigm can never overcome the apocalyptic paradigm; if it did it would no longer be Christian,

Within the Christian framework, the choice is between the apocalyptic paradigm, in which the earthly rulers are Gods illegitimate rivals, or the katechonic paradigm, in which the earthly rulers are Gods legitimate, if provisional, servants. Yet since the katechonic paradigm can never fully dispense with the apocalyptic framework, it is constantly threatened with apocalyptic dissolution – a prospect that was welcomed by the avowedly apocalyptic Early Christian, but that gradually came to be viewed as a terrifying eventuality to be staved off at all costs.<sup>24</sup>

It is also important to recognize the relation between the apocalyptic paradigm, Deuteronomistic paradigm and the prophetic paradigm, because the katechonic paradigm inherits these continuities. What is retained by the apocalyptic paradigm, is the authorities deriving their authority from God, who has supreme authority (Romans 13:1). Even under conditions of imminent apocalypse God still establishes worldly authorities. The apocalyptic paradigm is also in continuity with the Deuteronomistic paradigm, as one can still incur judgment or blessing based on obedience to the Law (Romans 13:3-5).

The difference between the Deuteronomistic, prophetic and apocalyptic paradigms, is that under conditions of imminent apocalypse, the judgment and abolition of the rulers is imminent and

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lawlessness is already at work, but only until the one who now restrains it is removed. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will destroy with the breath of his mouth, annihilating him by the manifestation of his coming.”

<sup>23</sup> I call this the ‘Christendom paradigm.’ The form of political theology that was normative for most of the history of western Christianity.

<sup>24</sup> Kotsko, 294.

*final*. Romans 13 (chapter on obeying the authorities and their divine authority) follows Romans 1 (On the Divine judgment of all creatures *and* authorities). The katechonic paradigm of early Christianity, recognizes that the apocalyptic paradigm is part of itself, but it must be kept at bay. In other words, the katechonic paradigm, is fundamentally conservative, because it is opposed to political change, especially the change that apocalyptic would unleash. As Jacob Taubes reminds us, the mutation of the paradigms in early Christianity is a response to “the nonoccurring event of the Parousia and consists of attempts to understand this non-occurrence in terms of a Christian design.”<sup>25</sup> It is a question of what to do with the between times, or the already-not-yet.

### ***Apocalyptic and Theodicy***

In his book *After Evil: A Politics of Human Rights*, Robert Meister observes the continuation of the katechonic paradigm in contemporary human rights discourse (and the discourse on international security, more broadly). Meister focuses less on the figures involved in the paradigm, and more on the temporality of the paradigm, what he, following Giorgio Agamben calls “the time between the times.”<sup>26</sup> Meister identifies Saint Paul as the architect of this paradigm. Everything that is needed for justice to be actualized has happened (The death and resurrection of Christ), and yet the world continues as though nothing has changed. On Meister’s reading, Saint Paul is saying that, “Now is a time to wait in faith that the deferral of justice is necessary to allow more time for the world to acknowledge that everything has changed.”<sup>27</sup> Meister follows up on the implications of this, by asking what it would look

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<sup>25</sup> Jacob Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, translated by David Ratmoko (Stanford University Press, 2009), 66.

<sup>26</sup> Meister, *After Evil*, 10.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

like to hold the faith in *the now*; “what kind of life is justified now?”<sup>28</sup> Meister turns to the Pauline notion of the “as if” or ‘as though,’ a notion that is developed when Paul writes that, “the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as *though* [emphasis mine] they had none.”<sup>29</sup>

Meister understands Paul to be saying that even though we have not yet witnessed the end of time, we cannot live as we did prior to the “work of Christ,” but we also cannot live as though the world has ended, because that is not yet the case. We are “not still in the past, not yet in the future”<sup>30</sup> or what philosopher Giorgio Agamben refers to as “the time that time takes to come to an end.”<sup>31</sup> The implication of this temporality is that the sins we commit between the time of Christ (and his death and resurrection) and the end of the world, will be different from the sins committed before the event of forgiveness (Christ). According to Meister, “sin will henceforward take the form of behaving as we would if the past were not over; it must be judged as a failure of faith—the faith that we are already forgiven and are now free to forgive accordingly, because time itself has changed.”<sup>32</sup>

Regarding Human Rights discourse, Meister connects this account of the katechonic paradigm with the example of South Africa. Little has changed in post-apartheid South Africa, and the sins committed are often described in terms of “violating the faith that things are already different—or will be once everyone accepts the change that has occurred.”<sup>33</sup> Sins of the present, are viewed as returns to the

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:29.

<sup>30</sup> Meister, *After Evil*, 10.

<sup>31</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, translated by Patricia Dailey (Stanford University Press, 2005), 67.

<sup>32</sup> Meister, *After Evil*, 11.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

past, rather than sins *occurring* in the present. The present is a time of transition from evil to justice; a time *after* evil and *before* justice. For Meister, human rights discourse, is not about justice, but about “keeping the peace” in the time between evil and justice. It is not just transitional time, which could be indefinite, but *extra* time, time for more people to accept that change has happened.

Meister outlines the temporality of the katechonic paradigm to clarify the ways that it persists in secular modernity, because “it is not necessary, however, to take a messianic view of the need for change in a time without God. To believe that we are living after evil and before justice is the essence of what it means to live in a secular age.”<sup>34</sup> Justice is not something that happens in the present, it is always a future oriented phenomenon. Returning to the katechonic paradigm, Meister’s temporal modulation reveals that the katechon has nothing to do with justice, but everything to do with order. It is my contention, that the “time between the times” temporality of the katechonic paradigm is what links redemption with a future actualization of justice, that never takes root in the present. Time is moving toward justice, but justice cannot be demanded in the present.

## ***Obama as Political Theologian***

The katechonic paradigm is operative within the political theology of Barack Obama. This should not be surprising, because Obama’s greatest theological influence is Reinhold Niebuhr.<sup>35</sup> For Niebuhr, the Christian should not escape the realities of the world, and dealing with the messiness of the world means making

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>35</sup> John Blake, "How Obama's Favorite Theologian Shaped his First Year in Office," CNN.com. February 5, 2010.  
<http://www.cnn.com/2010/POLITICS/02/05/Obama.theologian/>.

compromises.<sup>36</sup> No society is innocent, and therefore there is no way to do politics as a Christian that does not result in getting blood on one's hands. The solution for Niebuhr is not to avoid politics, but to take this task head on. Obama recognizes that being head of the United States makes him a political theologian. For Obama, "political theology" is something like moral vision, specifically a moral vision for the whole nation. At the 2006, call to renewal conference titled "Building a Covenant For a New America," Obama emphasizes the necessity of an American political theology, one that can traverse religious and secular, and progressive and conservative divisions. Part of Obama's political theology is the notion that secularists should be open to religious people, and religious people should not impose themselves upon secularists.<sup>37</sup> On the matter of moral vision, Obama criticizes progressives for their allergic reactions to religion:

[O]ur failures as progressives to tap into the moral underpinnings of the nation is not just rhetorical though. Our fear of getting "preachy" may also lead us to discount the role that values and culture play in some of our most urgent social problems.<sup>38</sup>

The United States needs a robust moral vision if it is going to face its biggest social problems, and progressives might not be up to the task, if they are unwilling to seriously engage with religion. Despite his critique of progressives, it is important to note that Obama is not (yet) speaking in an explicitly theological idiom. His call for a

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<sup>36</sup> For an overview of Niebuhr's political thought, see: William Werpehowski, "Reinhold Niebuhr" in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, edited by Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh, 180-93 (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 180-193.

<sup>37</sup> "Obama's 2006 speech on Faith and Politics," [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com). June 28, 2006.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/28/us/politics/2006obamaspeech.html>. Accessed January 1, 2018.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

common moral vision does not draw on any particular tradition. What is important here is that the nation needs a collective moral underpinning—a framework that makes its institutions and political culture coherent.<sup>39</sup> Obama wants a moral vision that everyone can get behind, and he eventually turns to the “Judeo-Christian” tradition as his model, because the law of the United States and popular morality is grounded in that tradition.<sup>40</sup> Obama is not wrong to recognize that the Hebrew Bible and Christian tradition inform American political life, in fact, it is this “Judeo-Christian” background that allows us to identify the continuity between Obama’s thinking and the theologico-political paradigms.

### ***The American Katechon***

As I note, above, war is mitigated by statespersons, philosophical, and theological reflection. In the Western tradition the most common and sophisticated philosophy of war is “Just War.” For Obama, Just War is a way to regulate the primordiality of warfare, but due to humanity’s infinite capacity for violence, the principles of Just War are often not obeyed.<sup>41</sup> When the principles of Just War are disobeyed, we backslide into our primordial ontological condition of warfare. For Obama, the best example of this is the Second World War (WWII) when, “wars between armies gave way to wars between nations-total wars in which the distinction between combatant and civilian became blurred.”<sup>42</sup> Obama proceeds to emphasize the importance of the United States in the Post-WWII era, because “in the wake of such destruction and with the advent of the nuclear age,

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<sup>39</sup> Gaston Espinosa, “Barack Obama’s Political Theology: Pluralism, Deliberative Democracy, and the Christian Faith,” *Political Theology* 13, 5 (2012): 610-33.

<sup>40</sup> Obama, *Faith and Politics*.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

it became clear to victor and vanquished alike that the world needed institutions to prevent another world war.”<sup>43</sup>

A *katechon* figure was needed to avoid the wreckage of WWII; a set of institutions that can regulate the forces of evil, between the time of evil (WWII) and the time of Justice (the consummation of history). Despite rejecting the league of nations, The United States, played a major role in constructing institutions to keep the peace (such as the United Nations, various human rights groups, and genocide prevention). For this reason, Obama argues that the United States is justified in waging war,

Yes, terrible wars have been fought, and atrocities committed. But there has been no Third World War. The Cold War ended with jubilant crowds dismantling a wall. Commerce has stitched much of the world together. Billions have been lifted from poverty. The ideals of liberty, self-determination, equality, and the rule of law have haltingly advanced.<sup>44</sup>

For Obama, the “peacekeeping” actions of the United States also produce positive good. The *Katechon* can do good beyond holding back evil.<sup>45</sup> They can restrain evil *and* advance the cause of global security and human rights. The *Katechon* can make progress (“haltingly advanced”). What is interesting about Obama’s speech is that he positions America as both *katechon* and *redeemer*. Obama shifts from describing the katechonic role of the United States, to discussing the redemptive role of the United States, thus mutating the katechonic paradigm. The Katechonic status of the United States, is secured *by its status as redeemer*. The redemptive work of the United States, even redeems it from its own errors,

Whatever mistakes we have made, the plain fact is this: The United States of America has helped underwrite global

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> See: Romans 13: 1-7.

security for more than six decades with the *blood* [emphasis mine] of our citizens and the strength of our arms.<sup>46</sup>

The world has been redeemed (or at least been granted relative peace) through the blood of the United States. The United States has gone to war, and paid the ultimate price for the sins of the world. The United States so loved the world, that it sacrificed its citizens, so that everyone who accepts liberty, self-determination, equality, and the rule of law, will not perish, but have a future for “our children and grandchildren”.<sup>47</sup>

In the Western Christian tradition, the crucifixion of Christ is the event of redemption. Talal Asad writes that in the crucifixion, “the violent breaking of the body is not an occasion for horror (as in the Chinese torture of a hundred cuts); it becomes the source of a transcendent truth through a story, a fable.”<sup>48</sup> In Obama’s narrative, the sacrifices of the American citizen (represented by the soldier), is not simply an occasion for horror, but an occasion for gratitude and awe, because through the blood of the citizen-soldier, the world has been redeemed. Obama’s understanding of (blood) sacrifice, corresponds to Asad’s account of the secularization of the crucifixion narrative,

If the Crucifixion represents the truth of violence, what is its significance in a secular age? In popular visual narratives (film, TV, etc.), the male hero often undergoes severe physical punishment or torture at the hands of ruthless men, but his acute suffering is the very vindication of truth. The

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<sup>46</sup> Obama, “Nobel Lecture.”

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. The idea of creating a future that is safe for (American) children, appears over the course of Obama’s political career. For a critical account of the relation between futurity and the figure of ‘the child’, see Lee Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>48</sup> Talal Asad, *On Suicide Bombing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 86.



audience suffers with him and anticipates a healing. This replays a modern secular crucifixion story in which the truth of the lonely figure is sustained by his willingness to suffer in mind and in body, to undergo unbearable pain and ecstasy that can become through sympathy an exquisite part of the spectator's own sensibility.<sup>49</sup>

This is the story of most contemporary American war films, and within the larger theologico-political framework, the notion that redemption follows from pain, makes sense when God's providence (or providence of any kind) is assumed. Asad notes that while modern liberals tend to disavow this kind of bloody violence, the modern liberal-humanist sensibility "joins ruthlessness to compassion and proposes that brutal killing can be at once the vilest evil and the greatest good."<sup>50</sup>

Obama is aware of the aesthetic dimensions of redemption; he even notes its dangers, when he says that "the soldier's courage and sacrifice is full of glory, expressing devotion to country, to cause and to comrades in arms. But war itself is never glorious, and we must never trumpet it as such."<sup>51</sup> War is never glorious, but the self-sacrificial courage of the soldier *is*. Not *mysterium bellum* (mystery of war), but *mysterium miles* (mystery of the soldier). The distinction between the glory of the sacrificial soldier, and the shame of war is similar to Hans Urs von Balthasar's distinction between Divine and worldly aesthetics. The crucifixion ends all worldly aesthetics while simultaneously giving way to Divine aesthetics.<sup>52</sup> Even "worldly aesthetics" cannot remain untouched by elements of the ugly, but

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Obama, "Nobel Lecture."

<sup>52</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of The Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, translated by Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, edited by Joseph Fessio, s.j., and John Riches, vol. 1: *Seeing the Form* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 460.

must come to term with it.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, Von Balthasar claims that any aesthetics that ignores the pain and ugliness of the world is simply “aestheticism” (which he contrasts with theological aesthetics). The Beautiful<sup>54</sup> must touch and be fragmented by the ugliness and pain of the world, because the eschatological promise of beauty can only be expressed through fragmentation.<sup>55</sup> Regarding the cross and “the kenosis of God” Von Balthasar argues that the cross should not be tailored to the aesthetic norms of the world, because the kenosis of God on the cross transvalues the pain and suffering of the world through the beauty of Christ’s act of redemptive suffering.<sup>56</sup>

The redemptive suffering of Christ, like the redemptive suffering of Obama’s soldier, expresses glory through an embrace of evil and suffering. Giorgio Agamben critically analyzes Von Balthasar’s understanding of glory, because he conceptualizes glory as a matter of aesthetics rather than a matter of politics.<sup>57</sup> Agamben notes that the German word *Herrlichkeit* is connected to domination and lordship, making it an irreducibly political term. However, Von Balthasar uses it in relation to aesthetics rather than politics. Moreover, Agamben observes that neither the Hebrew (*khabod*) or

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Capitalization is intentional.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> “The point of these remarks is not to tailor the Cross and the *kenosis* of God to the proportions and laws of a natural aesthetic. Nevertheless, the form which gives expression to the meaning of a radically sinful existence which yet stands under the sign of the hope for redemption is already, as such, mysteriously related, beyond itself, to the form of the Redeemer, and this form, in turn, takes the modalities of fallen existence upon itself so as to transvalue them by redemptive suffering.” Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, translated by Lorenzo Chiesa and Matteo Mandarini (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 197.

Greek (*Doxa*) terms for glory, have any connection to aesthetics.<sup>58</sup> Following Walter Benjamin, Agamben rightly warns against aestheticizing politics, especially political categories such as glory. When the aestheticizing of glory is refused, the glory of Obama's soldier' appears in a different light. It would mean coming to terms with the fact that the soldier's blood has no redemptive power, and thus the state in whose name they fight also has no redemptive power. In a time when it is common practice to bomb people to redeem them, or "end the slaughter" taking place in their native lands, the nation-state's claims to possess redemptive power must be called into question.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>59</sup> The Trump administration had just started bombing Syria at the time of writing.

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