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Posted Date: 14 January 2025

doi: 10.20944/preprints202501.0939.v1

Keywords: political power; ideologies; extremism; nationalism; Kingdom of God

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"Render therefore unto Caesar the things which be Caesar's, and unto God the things which be God's." (Luke 20:25).

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Abstract: Jesus and the Roman Empire: A Theological Perspective on Political Power, Ideologies, Extremism and Religious Nationalism. This article presents a theological examination of the distinction Jesus makes between the power of God and worldly, politico-military authority, particularly as manifested in the Roman Empire. Grounded in Gospel texts, particularly Luke 20:25 and Matthew 20:25–28, the analysis explores the contrasting values of divine power, which is characterized by love, peace, and reconciliation, against earthly power, defined by authority, coercion, manipulation, and brute force. The article delves into the meanings of political power, ideologies, and the dangers of religious nationalism and extremism, drawing conceptual boundaries between these forms of influence. Using the Roman Empire as a case study, the article reveals how Jesus critiques political authority in favor of the Kingdom of God, whose values stand in direct opposition to the ideologies of worldly power. This exploration further addresses the risks of ideological extremism, particularly within religious contexts, and emphasizes the theological importance of distinguishing between worldly governance and divine sovereignty. Ultimately, the Kingdom of God, as portrayed in the Gospels, is a realm of love, justice, and peace, while worldly systems often promote conflict and division. The article concludes by offering a model for Christians, based on Christ's teachings, to navigate the tensions between faith and political ideologies, keeping in focus the priorities of God's Kingdom and the power of divine love.

Keywords: political power; ideologies; extremism; nationalism; Kingdom of God

Introduction

In this article, I aim to highlight that Jesus makes a clear distinction between the power of God manifested through love, peace, and reconciliation, and mundane, politico-military power with its socio-economic dimensions, expressed through authority, persuasion, manipulation, brute force, and aggression. We will refer to this worldly power as the governing authority or political power, generically represented by the Roman Empire—contemporary with Jesus. Christ shows that this power is different from the Kingdom of God and represents the exact opposite, contrary to God's values. We base this argument on the very words of Jesus Christ from the Gospels:

> *"But Jesus called them to him and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'"* (Matthew 20:25–28, ESV).

We will explain what political power and ideologies mean, how extremism can emerge, and what nationalism and its religious-extremist form represent. Then, we will highlight what our public

 doi:10.20944/preprints202501.0939.v1

testimony is from this theological perspective of God's power, manifested through faith and the Kingdom of God in accordance with the model of Christ. This is why we will use the Gospel narrative as a reference point.

What Belongs to Caesar and What Belongs to God?

The biblical text that best highlights the distinction between political ideology and Christian testimony is found in Luke 20:20–26:

> *"So they watched him and sent spies, who pretended to be sincere, that they might catch him in something he said, so as to deliver him up to the authority and jurisdiction of the governor. So they asked him, 'Teacher, we know that you speak and teach rightly, and show no partiality, but truly teach the way of God. Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar, or not?' But he perceived their craftiness, and said to them, 'Show me a denarius. Whose likeness and inscription does it have?' They said, 'Caesar's.' He said to them, 'Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.' And they were not able in the presence of the people to catch him in what he said, but marveling at his answer they became silent."* (Luke 20:20–26, ESV).

This text is part of the Gospel of Luke, written by the same author. Luke is one of the four evangelists who recorded the life and activities of Jesus Christ on earth in great detail, as he mentions at the beginning of his Gospel:

> *"Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught." (Luke 1:1–3, ESV).*

Moreover, Luke is the only non-Jewish author of the Gospels and the only one who was not an eyewitness to the events he writes about. This means that his work reflects what today would be considered academic or scientific research[1]. Among the three synoptic Gospels, Luke provides the most information about the beginnings of the Gospel, even before the birth of Christ, highlighting the presence of divine activity from the very beginning[2]. The author gives us significant details about the historical context, being well-acquainted with Greco-Roman culture. We learn that he was likely a Syrian[3] from Antioch, not a Greek, a Semite familiar with Judaism, and a close collaborator and friend of the Apostle Paul[4]. Luke was converted to Christianity in the church of Antioch, one of the major centers of Christian mission and evangelism in the first century. From Paul, we know that Luke was "the beloved physician," with a very solid education, an excellent knowledge of the Greek language and philosophy[5], both of which contributed significantly to his research work in writing this Gospel. Additionally, we find that Luke was a trustworthy Christian, someone who could be relied upon, responsible, and always ready to help, as he did in his relationships with his collaborators.

Analyzing the text from Luke, we learn that there was a plot against Jesus with political-religious connotations. The goal and intention of this scheme, of this conspiracy, was to have Jesus handed

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[1] Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke,* William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Michigan, Cambridge, 1997, pp. 4 – 5.

[2] Darrell L. Bock, *Luke – The NIV Application Commentary,* Zondervan, Michigan, 1998, pp. 26 – 27.

[3] Darrell L. Bock, *Luke, Volume I: 1:1 – 9: 50,* Baker Publishing Group, Michigan, 1994, p. 32.

[4] Michael Wolter, *The Gospel According to Luke" Volume I (Luke 1 – 9: 50),* translated by Wayne Coppins and Christoph Heilig, Baylor University Press, Mohr Siebeck, Texas, Tubingen, 2016, p. 5.

[5] Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Editor: Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., A Michael Clazier Book published by The Liturgical Press, Minnesote, 1991, p. 3.

 doi:10.20944/preprints202501.0939.v1

over to the political authorities, thus silencing Him. Here, we observe how religious powers use political authority to achieve their objectives. In other words, "the ends justify the means," or as a Romanian proverb states: "Make a pact with the devil until you cross the bridge." The evangelist Luke refers to them as "spies," and the Greek word used is *egkathetos*[6], which means someone subordinate (to an institution or ideology), working secretly, like a deceiver who lies in wait. This word is also used for a spy[7]. Regarding their religious affiliation, the evangelist Matthew provides more details: *„Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words. And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians" (Matthew 22:15–16, ESV).* Among those participating in this plot, we identify the following groups: the Pharisees and the Herodians. Another question we raise in this Jewish religious context is whether there was within these groups a thought pattern that could be associated with religious nationalism. We will describe each mentioned group succinctly. The Pharisees[8] were a religious group that knew the Law of Moses and strictly adhered to this Law "to the letter" as well as to other rules and traditions of interpreting the written Law. Christ enters into open conflict with these religious men, accusing them of caring more for their traditions, for their moral law, than for the Law of God. The answer to the question of whether the Pharisees were nationalists is much more complex. The concept of nationalism as defined in modernity did not exist during the time of the Pharisees. However, we can speak of a religious and cultural identity tied to the specific ethnicity of the Jews. More than that, "the ethnic/national identity of Israel is discursively articulated in the narrative texts of the Hebrew Bible."[9] Keeping the conceptual proportions, we can say that in the thinking of the Pharisees, there were sufficient notions that tended toward nationalism. If they were nationalists, they were more moderate ones, who, for example, did not favor the tribute, but they did not openly oppose it, as the Zealots did, making them quite different from the Zealots. The Zealots[10] were an extremist and militant group. They fought with weapons in hand for the liberation of the people of Israel. They envisioned that Jewish nationalism would re-establish the Davidic Messianic kingdom, through which the Jewish nation would rule the entire world. Among the disciples of the Lord, there was one called Simon the Zealot (or the Canaanite). Some exegetes believe that he might have been part of this group, that he was a zealous nationalist before being called to follow Jesus. Bible commentators also suggest that this expression might indicate his temperament—more passionate, more zealous[11]. These Zealots are the fundamentalists of our days. They can be identified with those radicalized believers, rigid in their dogma, more interested in their own teachings than in Christ's teachings. They are more in love with their own projects, their own image, than with the love of Christ. In a way, they wanted Israel to be what the Roman Empire already was. The Herodians were those who supported the Herodian dynasty, which began with Herod the Great, a vassal of the Roman Empire from 37 B.C. and ended with Herod Agrippa II in 97

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[6] Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *Greek – English Lexicon*, Clareddon Press, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996, p.469.

[7] J. Reiling and J. L. Swellengrebel, *A Handbook on the Gospel of Luke*, UBS Handbook Series, New York, United Bible Societies, 1993, p. 647.

[8] Anthony J. Saldarini, "Pharisees", in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman New York, Doubleday, 1992, p. 289.

[9] Marcel V. Măcelaru, *Identitatea între povară și privilegiu: reprezentări ale poporului sfânt în literatura deutoronomică*, Cluj-Napoca, Risoprint, 2012, p. 7.

[10] David Rhoads, "Zealots", in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, New York, Doubleday, 1992, p. 1043.

[11] M. J. Wilkins, "Disciples", in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight, Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity Press, 1992, p. 181.

 doi:10.20944/preprints202501.0939.v1

A.D. The Herodians were Roman partisans, ruling with their help, and therefore they were favorable to the tribute[12].

An important aspect that we highlight is that conspiracies existed even in the time of Jesus Christ, and it seems that they are as old as the world. What is essential and characterizes these conspiracies is deceit, hidden intentions, cunning, duplicity, and malice. These are the reasons why conspiracy theories and conspiracies are not credible and should not be accepted. Unfortunately, in our days, these conspiracies are more trusted and embraced by our Christian communities, and as an argument, we bring up the Covid-19 pandemic.[13] Another characteristic, although not mandatory, is that most conspiracies are often politicized. Thus, we want to draw attention to another aspect highlighted in this New Testament passage: Christ cannot be politicized. Christianity should not be politicized, nor should it be used for any political purpose. Throughout history, we see that this union between religion and politics has brought the greatest social disasters and countless bloody conflicts. Another important perspective that we want to highlight is that Christ is not subordinated to any ideology, whether religious or political. Christianity cannot be ideological. What does ideologization mean? This position argues that ideologizing Christianity involves subordinating Christianity and its values to an ideology, thereby dismantling the very essence of the Christian faith.[14] By ideology, we mean that a unique solution is viewed as messianic for all of humanity's problems. Ideologization targets this obsession with socially and politically implementing this singular solution, this idolatrous militancy by which Christ is replaced.

Defining the Concept of Ideology

An ideology represents a set of ideas, beliefs, and attitudes, conscious or unconscious, that reflect or influence perceptions and interpretations—correct or erroneous—of the social and political world. It serves to recommend, justify, or support collective actions aimed at maintaining or changing political institutions and practices. The concept of ideology is divided almost irreconcilably into two main meanings. The first carries a pejorative connotation and refers to a particular (philosophical, religious, political) type of thinking that is historically distorted, reinforcing certain relations of dominance, against which ideology is used as a critical, revealing concept. The second meaning is neutral and refers to various sets of cultural symbols and ideas that people use to perceive, understand, and evaluate social and political realities, often within a systematic framework. These sets fulfill important functions of orientation and integration. In this latter approach, there is a significant division. Some analysts argue that the study of ideology can be neutral, based on facts and behaviors, to understand how political beliefs reflect the social world and drive people to concrete actions. Others argue that ideology confers politically charged meanings on how the social world is conceptualized, making it an instrument for constructing reality rather than simply reflecting it. This approach also applies to the interpretations formulated by the analysts of ideology themselves[15].

An ideology can be broadly understood as a system of beliefs, ideas, or principles that offer a coherent worldview and framework for understanding societal structures and human behavior. According to Andrew Heywood, ideologies provide individuals and groups with a structured set of

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[12] Harold W. Hoehner, "Herodians," in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible,* Grand Rapids, Michigan, Baker Book House, 1988, pp. 972–973.

[13] Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Spiritual lessons observed through the Coronavirus Crisis", în *Dialogo. Issue of Modern Man,* 2020, vol.6, no.2, pp. 71-82.

[14] Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Aspects of Biblical Philosophy on the Development of World Civilizations", *Scientia Moralitas. International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* 8 (2023), no.1, pp. 62-79.

[15] Freeden, Michael, "Ideology", 1998, doi:10.4324/9780415249126-S030-1. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Taylor and Francis, https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/ideology/v-1. (Accessed in 4th October 2024).

 doi:10.20944/preprints202501.0939.v1

values and assumptions about how society should function, shaping everything from political systems to social norms. Ideologies offer a blueprint for organizing political, economic, or social life, influencing both individual and collective behavior[16]. Ideologies can be held by individuals or larger groups, and they often underpin political movements, parties, and governance systems. For example, ideologies like liberalism, conservatism, socialism, or nationalism propose distinct ways of organizing society, each based on certain values (e.g., individual freedom, social justice, national unity). Political ideologies are particularly influential as they inform public policies, government decisions, and legal structures[17].

In summary, ideologies provide a structured way to view the world, shaping not only individual beliefs but also the policies, laws, and social movements that define society. They offer a blueprint for organizing political, economic, and social life, acting as both a unifying force for groups and a guide for governance. Ideologies are not fixed; they evolve with societal changes and often influence or are influenced by historical, cultural, and political contexts.

The Danger of Ideologies

The danger of any ideology becoming extremist or fundamentalist lies in its potential to impose a singular and rigid vision of truth. This can often lead to intolerance, violence, and the suppression of diversity. When ideologies harden into dogmas, they fuel exclusionary and harmful behaviors against those who are perceived as adversaries or as representing "other" ideas. The more rigid the ideology becomes, the less room there is for dissent or pluralism, which are essential for healthy democratic societies. Ideologies serve as interpretative frameworks that help people make sense of the world and guide collective action. These frameworks shape political, religious, or social realities by providing a coherent narrative through which people can understand the complexities of human life. However, when an ideology becomes dogmatic, it no longer serves as a tool for interpretation and action but instead becomes a rigid and unquestionable truth.

Hannah Arendt, in her work *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), examined how ideologies become dangerous when they claim total authority over reality. Arendt argues that totalitarian ideologies such as Nazism and Stalinism replace critical thinking with an all-encompassing worldview, which transforms pluralism into homogeneity. These ideologies also create scapegoats (like Jews under the Nazis or "bourgeois enemies" under Stalinism), using violence to maintain the purity of the ideological vision. Arendt's argument is that totalitarian ideologies become dangerous when they claim total authority over reality, suppressing critical thinking and demanding absolute loyalty from their followers. By creating a single, all-encompassing worldview, totalitarian regimes destroy pluralism, the very foundation of democratic societies[18].

Arendt focuses on how totalitarian ideologies manipulate truth and impose a singular vision of reality that tolerates no dissent. By eliminating alternative perspectives, these regimes create a homogeneous society where any deviation from the official line is seen as a threat to the ideological purity of the state. This lack of plurality makes these systems inherently oppressive and violent, as the regime must continuously suppress opposition to maintain its ideological dominance[19]. Arendt also explores the role of scapegoats[20] in totalitarian ideologies. She discusses how totalitarian regimes

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[16] Andrew Heywood, *Political ideologies – An Introduction, Seventh Edition*, Macmillan Education, Red Globe Press, London, 2021, pp. 2 – 3.

[17] Andrew Heywood, 2021, pp. 15 – 16.

[18] Nisbet, Robert, „Review of *Arendt on Totalitarianism*, by Hannah Arendt", *The National Interest*, no. 27 (1992): 85–91. http://www.jstor.org/stable/42896812 (Accessed in 4th October 2024).

[19] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Penguin Modern Classics, Kindle Edition, 2017, p. 273.

[20] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, pp. 440 – 441.

 doi:10.20944/preprints202501.0939.v1

use specific groups as enemies of the state to unify the population against a common threat. For example, in Nazi Germany, Jews were demonized and blamed for the country's economic and social problems, serving as a convenient target for Hitler's regime. Similarly, under Stalinism, the "bourgeois enemies"—often fabricated enemies of the working class—were used to justify purges and mass repression. This use of scapegoats helps to solidify the regime's power by fostering fear, paranoia, and a sense of external threat. Arendt's analysis also delves into the mechanics of totalitarian movements, explaining how they operate by spreading propaganda[21] that distorts reality. By constantly reshaping facts to fit their ideological narrative, totalitarian regimes create an environment where truth becomes meaningless, and only the party's version of reality is valid. This is one of the key dangers of totalitarian ideologies: they not only attempt to dominate the political and social spheres but also seek to control thought itself, erasing critical thinking in favor of blind obedience[22].

Similarly, Karl Popper, in The Open Society and Its Enemies, discusses how ideologies can become rigid and closed systems that reject rational discourse and seek to impose absolute "truths." Popper argues that the danger arises when ideologies no longer tolerate dissent and see their worldview as infallible. This can lead to extremism because it negates the possibility of error or alternative perspectives, which are essential to a democratic and open society[23]. Karl Popper contrasts open societies, which thrive on pluralism and critical thinking, with closed societies, which are characterized by rigid, authoritarian structures and ideological dogmatism. Popper identifies the roots of closed ideological systems in the works of certain philosophers, particularly Plato, Hegel, and Marx, who he argues paved the way for totalitarian thinking by promoting historical determinism and the belief in an absolute truth that can guide society[24]. Popper's critique is especially directed at historical determinism—the belief that history unfolds according to fixed laws or an inevitable process. He argues that ideologies that claim to understand the "laws of history" (such as Marxism or Nazism) are particularly dangerous because they provide a justification for authoritarian control. If history is seen as progressing toward an inevitable outcome, dissent and alternative viewpoints are considered irrelevant or even obstructive. This leads to the suppression of freedom in favor of a singular vision of the future[25]. Popper emphasizes that when ideologies claim infallibility, they deny the possibility of error or revision. In doing so, they oppose one of the essential features of science and democratic thought: the understanding that knowledge is provisional and always open to revision[26]. For Popper, the belief in infallibility is a hallmark of totalitarian ideologies[27] because it allows those in power to justify their actions without accountability. Once an ideology presents itself

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[21] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* pp. 407 – 410.

[22] Dana R. Villa, „Intruduction: the development of Arendt's political thought", pp. 1 – 21, in *The Cambridge Companionto Hannah Arendt,*Edited by Dana Villa, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 2 – 8.

[23] Jarvie, Ian C.. *Popper, Karl Raimund (1902–94),* 1998, doi:10.4324/9780415249126-DD052-1. Routledge 1998, *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Taylor and Francis, https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/biographical/popper-karl-raimund-1902-94/v-1 , (Accessed in 4th October 2024).

[24] Sandra Pralog, „Minima Moralia, Is there an ethics of the Open Society", pp. 127 – 143, in *Popper's Open Society After Fifty Years,* Edited by Ian Jarvie and Sandra Pralog, Routledge, London and New York, 2005, pp. 131 – 143.

[25] Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies,* with a preface by Vaclav Havel, Routledge, London and New York, 2002, pp. 496 – 497.

[26] Mark A. Natturno, „The Open Society and Its Enemies: Authority, Community, and Bureaucracy", pp. 42 – 56, in *Popper's Open Society After Fifty Years*, Edited by Ian Jarvie and Sandra Pralog, Routledge, London and New York, 2005, pp. 43 – 44.

[27] Karl Popper, 2002, p. 17.

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as an unquestionable truth, it legitimizes authoritarianism by asserting that any form of opposition is not only misguided but immoral or even dangerous[28].

In conclusion, we want to show how an ideology – *any ideology* – can become extremist. An ideology becomes extremist when its adherents pursue their beliefs in an uncompromising or militant way, often through violent, coercive, or undemocratic means.

This transformation typically occurs when:

- Rejection of Moderation, compromise: when an ideology evolves into a worldview that tolerates no deviation or opposition, insisting that only its goals are valid.
- Militant Advocacy: when followers advocate or engage in violence, intimidation, or illegal actions to impose their beliefs or achieve their goals.
- Dehumanization: when the ideology labels those who disagree or differ as inherently evil or inferior, often leading to their persecution or marginalization.
- Demonization of Opponents: when ideological opponents are seen not as people with different opinions but as enemies to be eliminated or neutralized.

For example, nationalism, as an ideology, promotes national pride and unity. When it becomes extreme nationalism, it can lead to xenophobia, racism, or even calls for ethnic cleansing, as adherents view their nation as superior and others as threats to its purity or success. Leftist ideologies, such as Bolshevism and Communism, which exclusively promote their own social solution, by changing the capitalist social order through a violent revolution, eradicating opponents through class struggle, follow the same dangerous path.

Thus, the path from ideology to extremism is often marked by increased intolerance, rigid dogmatism, and the endorsement of extreme measures to achieve ideological goals. All ideologies that have such a pattern are called totalitarian ideologies because they want to obtain power at any cost, to hold a monopoly on political power and also through the same processes they want to establish a new world order, according to their own conception of man, life and politics[29].

The Extremism

Extremism refers to beliefs, ideologies, or actions that fall outside the range of what is generally accepted by the mainstream or dominant values within a society or political system. Extremists, whether they are individuals or groups, typically reject compromise and moderate perspectives, instead advocating for absolute adherence to their own worldview. They often view their goals and beliefs as the only legitimate options, and they are willing to pursue their objectives through radical means, including violence, intimidation, or illegal activities. One of the key aspects of extremism is its intolerance for differing viewpoints. Extremists often frame the world in binary terms, viewing those who disagree with them not merely as opponents but as enemies or threats to their cause[30]. In its more radical forms, extremism can lead to calls for violent revolution, terrorism, or other forms of aggression aimed at achieving ideological goals. Extremism is not confined to any one ideology or belief system. It can manifest across the political, religious, or cultural spectrum. This whole process of moving from ideologies to extremism is called radicalisation[31]. We want to highlight that even religious movements, when taken to extreme levels of rigidity or absolutism, can become violent or

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[28] Karl Popper, 2002, pp. 171 – 176.

[29] Emilio Geentile, „Total and Totalitarian Ideologies", in *The Oxford Handbook of Ideologies*, pp. 80 – 99, Edited by Michael Freeden, Lyman Tower, and Marc Stears Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013, pp. 90 – 98.

[30] Randy Borum, „Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories", *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 4 (2011): 7–36, pp. 7 – 10, http://www.jstor.org/stable/26463910 , (Accessed in 4th October 2024).

[31] Sarah Marsden, Leena Malkki, and Joel Busher, „Introduction", pp. 1 – 16, in *The Routledge Handbook on Radicalisation and Countering Radicalisation*, Routledge, London and New York, 2024, pp. 1 – 14.

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intolerant, as seen in the rise of religious fundamentalism[32]. Likewise, political extremism can occur on both the far-right and far-left ends of the political spectrum, each promoting an uncompromising vision for societal change. Far-right extremism often emphasizes nationalism, ethnocentrism, and sometimes xenophobia. This form of extremism may call for the exclusion or suppression of minority groups or the violent overthrow of democratic institutions in favor of authoritarian control[33]. Far-left extremism tends to focus on achieving radical economic equality, often through revolutionary means. Left-wing extremists may view capitalism, private property, or class hierarchies as fundamental evils that must be overthrown, sometimes through violence or militant activism[34]. One of the most dangerous aspects of extremism is its propensity toward violence. Extremists often believe that conventional political or social mechanisms are insufficient to bring about the changes they desire. As a result, they may justify the use of violent tactics, whether through terrorism, insurgency, or organized militancy. This is especially prevalent among terrorist groups that use extremism as both a recruiting tool and an operational strategy. According to Borum, extremist groups tend to adopt narratives that portray their struggle as a battle between good and evil, thereby justifying violence as a necessary means to achieve their ends. Such groups often dehumanize their perceived enemies, making violence easier to justify within their ideological framework[35]. We want to give some examples of extremist militant ideologies: Communism, Marxism-Leninism, Nazism, Religious Nationalism, Religious Fundamentalism, Cancel Culture.

In summary, extremism represents a departure from the accepted norms of a society or political system, characterized by an uncompromising and often violent pursuit of a singular vision. It spans the ideological spectrum, manifesting in various forms, whether political, religious, or cultural, and poses a significant challenge to democratic institutions and societal stability when it resorts to illegal or violent means.

Defining the Concept of Political Power

We will delineate the concept of power and implicitly the concept of authority. Power always involves authority. The one who has power also has authority. However, not all who have authority also have power. Authority can be delegated, and legitimately represented. Authority refers to the legitimate right to wield power, typically granted by laws, customs, or accepted norms within a society. Authority is distinct from mere coercive power because it is accepted by those over whom it is exercised. The entire system of this world is founded on power, on this concept of power, and is particularly based on the exercise of power in any form. Power is defined as the capacity to do something or to act in a certain way. Power is the ability to make decisions that affect others[36]. Power is the ability to influence the behavior of others and to direct events toward a predetermined goal[37]. In other words, power expresses force, dynamism, energy, and capabilities. Political power is defined differently depending on the historical, geographical, and cultural context. As a generalized definition, political power refers to the capacity of an individual or a group of individuals to exercise authority to lead or govern a group of people, a community, a nation, or multiple nations. This power

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[32] Gabriel A. Almond, R. Scott Appleby, and Emmanuel Sivan, *Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalisms around the World,* The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2003, pp. 1 – 7.

[33] Mudde, Cas. *„The Far Right Today"*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2019, pp. 29 – 30.

[34] McClosky H, Chong D. „Similarities and Differences Between Left-Wing and Right-Wing Radicals", in *British Journal of Political Science*, 1985; 15(3), pp. 329-363. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123400004221, (Accessed in 4th October 2024).

[35] Randy Borum, 2011, pp. 17 – 22.

[36] Robert A. Dahl, „The Concept of Power", *Behavioral Science* 2, no. 3 December 11, 1957, pp. 201– 215, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/bs.3830020303 , p. 214.

[37] Steven Lukes, *Power a Radical View,* Second Edition, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, pp. 17 – 19.

 doi:10.20944/preprints202501.0939.v1

is supported by military and economic strength. Political power concerns the measures through which rights, obligations, privileges, and well-being are ensured in a society. All these measures or governing policies aim to control the decisions and actions of people. These, in turn, influence the values, culture, and religion of society[38]. We aim to discuss two opposing and well-defined concepts of power found in political doctrines. These concepts refer to power: soft power and hard power. Soft power[39], or agreeable, attractive, or persuasive power, refers to a country's cultural, economic, and ideological influence to convince (in an agreeable way) another country to do something. In politics, soft power is considered the ability to attract collaboration, to convince rather than to coerce (in contrast to hard power). In other words, soft power shapes the preferences of others through attraction and persuasion. A key feature of soft power is its attractiveness to cultural, political, and economic values, especially the fact that it is non-coercive. Hard power[40], or brute force, involves the use of military power and economic capacity to influence and force the behavior and interests of other political and state bodies. Hard power expresses brutality, coercion, and the disregard for human rights and freedoms.[41]

In conclusion, political power can be understood through two main concepts: soft power and hard power, each representing different approaches to influencing and governing societies. Soft power emphasizes persuasion, attraction, and the influence of culture, values, and ideologies, relying on collaboration rather than coercion. It shapes preferences by appealing to others, often through cultural and political means, and is non-coercive. On the other hand, hard power relies on military strength and economic force to impose control, often disregarding human rights and freedoms.[42] It represents a more direct and coercive approach to achieving political objectives. In modern political discourse, understanding these two forms of power is crucial, as they reflect the varying strategies used by states and institutions to achieve influence and control on both national and global levels.

Nationalism - Conceptual Delimitations

Nationalism is a political and social ideology that emphasizes the importance of national identity, culture, and the unity of a nation. Nationalists believe that the culture, values, and traditions of a nation should be preserved and protected and that the political and economic interests of the nation should take precedence over those of other nations or international organizations. Nationalism can manifest in a variety of forms, ranging from moderate cultural pride to more extreme forms of ethnocentrism and chauvinism[43]. Nationalism can be seen as both a positive force, promoting unity and pride in cultural heritage, and a negative force, leading to conflicts and division between nations and ethnic groups. In some cases, nationalism has been used to justify aggressive military actions and territorial expansion, while in other cases, it has been used to promote independence movements and the creation of new states. According to Ernest Gellner, nationalism arises as a result of the development of industrial society[44] and the spread of mass education[45]. Gellner believed that nationalism is primarily a cultural phenomenon, rooted in the idea that a nation is defined by a common culture and language. He argued that the rise of modern industrial societies and the

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[38] Steven Lukes, 2005, pp. 29 – 44.

[39] Joseph S. Nye, Jr, „Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics", New York, Public Affairs, 2004, pp. 5 – 18.

[40] Joseph S. Nye, Jr, 2004, pp. 5 – 8.

[41] Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, *Om-Demnitate-Libertate (Man-Dignity-Freedom)*, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Risoprint, 2019, pp. 201-215.

[42] Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Freedom of Religion, Always a Hot Issue", *Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință (Journal for Freedom of Conscience)*, Les Arsc, France, Editions IARSIC, 2017, pp.545-550.

[43] Dale J. Stahl, *An Analysis of Ernest Gellner's Nations and Nationalism*, The Macat Library, London, 2017, p. 41.

[44] Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism (New Perspectives on the Past)*, Dallas, Cornell University Press, 1983, p. 38.

[45] Ernest Gellner, 1983, p. 64.

 doi:10.20944/preprints202501.0939.v1

emergence of a new educated class created a demand for a common cultural identity and a sense of national unity. He also believed that nationalism can be a powerful force in shaping modern political and economic systems and that it is closely tied to the development of democracy and the nation-state[46].

In conclusion, nationalism is a multifaceted ideology that prioritizes the preservation of national identity, culture, and unity, often placing the interests of the nation above external entities. It can have both constructive and destructive impacts: promoting unity and cultural pride on one hand, while fostering conflict, division, and even aggressive territorial ambitions on the other. As Ernest Gellner posits, nationalism arose in response to the development of industrial societies and mass education, where shared cultural identity became essential for political cohesion. Furthermore, nationalism is intricately linked to the evolution of modern political and economic systems, especially in the context of democracy and nation-state formation.

The Roman Empire and the Kingdom of God – A Theological Perspective

We have made these conceptual distinctions to have the necessary tools for analyzing political power as manifested by the Roman Empire during the time of Jesus Christ. These tools will help us see, from another interpretive angle, the theological perspective regarding the power of this world and the power of God manifested through the Kingdom of God. Jesus lived during the time of the Caesars and the Roman Empire. This is the political context from which we begin this theological exploration concerning authority, power, and nationalism. After having defined concepts such as authority, power, and nationalism, we will continue with the complex religious context, where we will emphasize the position of Jesus Christ regarding Jewish nationalism. The Roman Empire[47] represents, historically, one of the largest and most well-organized empires, which, in terms of power, greatly influenced later political doctrines, especially in the Western European space. It is also considered that nearly half of the world's population came into contact with the power of the Empire and was under Roman authority (or power). All of this not only influence the daily lives of people but also the culture and values of communities[48]. The political power represented by the Roman Empire was one of brute force (hard power).[49] It was the power of a conquering empire based on military strength. This form of power is called imperialism, which, unfortunately, still exists today: the most accessible example is the attitude of the Russian Federation towards Ukraine and the war between these two nations. The Russian Federation is the aggressor, which, in line with an imperialist-nationalist ideology, seeks to conquer Ukraine. The power of this world manifests itself through force, arrogance, aggression, and hatred. The power of God, on the other hand, is manifested through love—the love that sacrifices itself and seeks the good of others. This divine love manifests socially without political or ideological implications. The greatest challenge and the greatest obstacle to promoting Christian love is Christianity itself when it subordinates itself to political power and ideologies. The close connection between political power and the ideology it promotes, along with Christianity, has led to a long history of heresies and violence[50].

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[46] Ernest Gellner, 1983, p. 142.

[47] Christopher Kelly, *The Roman Empire: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 1.

[48] Mike McClaflin, *Christ in the Synoptic Gospels: An Independent-Study Textbook,* Global University, Springfield, 1970, pp. 44 - 45.

[49] Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Aspects of the situation of the Jews and implicitly of the Christians after the Roman conquest of Jerusalem", *Jurnal teologic*, Vol 23, nr 1 (2024), pp. 27-42.

[50] Miroslav Volf, *A Religion of Love,* Biola University`s Center for Christian Thought, https://cct.biola.edu/religion-of-love, paragraph 7, (Accessed in 4th October 2024).

 doi:10.20944/preprints202501.0939.v1

Another very important aspect with social and political implications is the promotion of nationalism as part of religious identity, which is very prevalent in this Balkan space, predominantly Orthodox. Within the framework of this orthodox tradition, the heresy of Phyletism becomes visible. Phyletism is the principle of nationalities applied in the ecclesiastical domain: in other words, the conflation between church and nation.[51] The term ethnophyletism designates the idea that a local autocephalous church should be based not on a local (ecclesial) criterion, but on an ethnophyletist, national or linguistic one. It was used at the local council held in Constantinople on 10 September 1872 to qualify "phyletist (religious) nationalism", which was condemned as a modern ecclesial heresy: the church should not be confused with the destiny of a single nation or a single race[52].

Religious nationalism has three dimensions: it is ideological, exclusive, and militant. The effects of this conceptual deviation are very well illustrated in the sacred history of the people of Israel and in the representations the holy people had about their own religious identity. This religious identity is based on the combination of two types ("modalities"): "these are composed of a matrix of socio-political characterizations observable from the outside and a dynamic ideological expression of internal identity attitudes displayed in the interaction between YHWH and Israel."[53] The promotion of this nationalist-religious identity among the Jews resulted in missing the Messiah. The Jews' representation of the Messiah was ideological rather than theological, and it did not align with the interpretation Jesus Christ provides in the Gospels. Thus, we have an example of where this nationalist ideology, even if religious in nature—be it Jewish or Christian—can lead. This example serves as a true lesson for us.

Next, I will conduct a theological analysis of religious nationalism from the narrative of the parable of the Good Samaritan and emphasize that Christ is not a nationalist. On the contrary, He shows that God's goodness and love are for all humanity: "For He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust." (Matthew 5:45, ESV). Christ sends us into all the world to present the Gospel. This good news of God's reconciliation is for all people, regardless of ethnicity, nationality, or language they speak. Theology promotes unity in diversity. In Acts 2, with the descent of the Holy Spirit, we observe the uniqueness of the message proclaimed and the diversity of other languages: "We hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God." (Acts 2:11, ESV). We want to emphasize, not as a negligible aspect, the importance of anthropology: the need to engage with others through the lens of each person's language and culture.

Continuing, we will show that, in this narrative context of the Gospels, the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37)[54] very well presents the relationship between the Kingdom and the love of God and nationalism. In the mentality of the Jews from the Old Testament and those contemporary with Jesus Christ, love is emphasized by the expression "love your neighbor as yourself." Love was concerned with one's own dignity, measure, and value. That is, you could love your neighbor to the same extent that you could love yourself. If you could respect yourself, to the same extent, you were required to respect the other, of the same nation and faith as you. I emphasize this aspect of ethnicity because here Jewish nationalism is highlighted. Jews considered that their neighbor was only the one who shared the same faith and was of the same ethnicity as them. They were exclusive and hermetic regarding this "fellowship" of love. The stranger, the heretic, the one of another faith, and the one of another ethnicity were not worthy of Jewish love. Therefore, this type of love is conditional. Christ's perspective, in this context of the Parable of the Good Samaritan, is totally different regarding love

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[51] Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Aspects of the Relationship between Church and State", *Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință (Journal for Freedom of Conscience),* vol.10 (2022), nr.2, pp. 585-595.

[52] Philip. Walters, „Notes on Autocephaly and Phyletism", in *Religion State and Society,* 2002, Vol. 30 (4), pp. 357–364.

[53] Marcel V. Măcelaru, *Identitatea între povară și privilegiu: reprezentări ale poporului sfânt în literatura deutoronomică,* Cluj-Napoca, Risoprint, 2012, p. 232.

[54] Darrell L. Bock, *The NIV Application Commentary: Luke*, Zondervan, epub edition, Michigan, 2014, pp. 345 – 351.

 doi:10.20944/preprints202501.0939.v1

and nationalism. For the Jews of Jesus' time, Samaritans, who were of a different ethnicity than the Jews, were not even considered people; they were worthy of contempt because they had altered the Law and faith of Moses. They were considered heretics and an impure people, nation who had mingled with other nations through mixed marriages. Through the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Christ wants to show the Pharisees that the neighbor is also the stranger and the unbeliever, that every person bears the "image and likeness" of God and that in God's intention, in accordance with God's love, there are no discriminations based on ethnicity, religion, sex, etc. The universality of Christian love is very much highlighted by the term "agape." The Agape love refers to that love which sacrifices itself. This love originates in God and is unconditional. Nothing can condition God to show His love for people. This love descends so that man may be exalted, sacrifices itself so that man may have life. This Love is Jesus Christ. The Kingdom of God is represented by Christ and is totally different from political power.

About the Kingdom of God in the Gospels

The overview of Israel's history highlights the importance of Jesus' proclamation that the kingdom of God was near (Matt. 4:17; Mark 1:15). Those who heard Jesus didn't ask for an explanation of the kingdom, as they understood him to be announcing the arrival of a glorious new era. In this era, Israel would be exalted, and the nations would become subject to Israel's God. The Lord would rule over the whole earth, the son of David would reign as king, and the exile would end. The new covenant would be fulfilled, God's people would follow His law, and the promised new creation would become a reality. The Lord would pour out His Spirit on all people, and the promise to Abraham—that all nations would be blessed—would be fulfilled. The Synoptic Gospels clearly show that the kingdom of God is central to Jesus' teaching. In this way, Jesus aligns with John the Baptist, who also proclaimed the coming of the kingdom (Matt. 3:2). John's message in the wilderness and his baptism in the Jordan signified the promise of a new exodus for those who repent and confess their sins (Matt. 3:3–6), while judgment awaited those who did not repent (Matt. 3:7–10). The phrase "kingdom of God" appears four times in Matthew, fourteen in Mark, thirty-two in Luke, and four in John. Although Matthew may seem to use this phrase less frequently, it is important to note that he uses the expression "kingdom of heaven" thirty-two times. While older dispensational views made a distinction between the "kingdom of God" and the "kingdom of heaven," modern scholarship largely agrees that these terms refer to the same reality. It is generally thought that Matthew, addressing a Jewish audience, used "heaven" as a respectful substitute for "God," since Jews often avoided directly using God's name. Thus, "kingdom of God" and "kingdom of heaven" are understood as synonymous[55]. Those who belong to God will inherit the kingdom in the future, but at the same time, Jesus' disciples were already part of God's kingdom during the present age. The kingdom had arrived, particularly through the preaching and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. Although the kingdom had come, one must actively seek it and prioritize it in order to receive its blessings. Luke 16:16 conveys a similar message: the good news of the kingdom, the gospel, had been proclaimed since the time of John the Baptist, reaching its highest expression in the ministry and proclamation of Jesus. The focus on "good news" implies that the kingdom's message fulfills the promises of return from exile as foretold in Isaiah (Isa. 40:9; 52:7). Luke also adds, "and everyone forces his way into it" (Luke 16:16). This should be understood similarly to Matthew's account—one must act decisively and surrender everything to enter the kingdom. Those who place something else above the kingdom will miss out on its blessings, as Jesus insisted that the kingdom must hold the highest priority in the lives of those who follow the Lord (Matt. 6:33). In Matthew 13:11, Jesus explains that the parables unveil the "secrets" or "mysteries" of the kingdom of God, which also reveal the

[55] Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ*, Baker Publishing Group, Michigan, 2008, pp. 45 – 46.

 doi:10.20944/preprints202501.0939.v1

kingdom's "already–not yet" nature. The kingdom is already bearing fruit and fulfilling its purpose in the world, advancing through the Word of God. However, its full consummation will not occur until the end of the age, when judgment comes[56].

Conclusion

In this paper, I discussed what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God. I explored what ideologies are, how they are defined, and what they represent while emphasizing a very important aspect: the danger of any ideology becoming extremist. I then analyzed what extremism represents, defined the concept of political power, and finally, delineated the concept of nationalism. These conceptual distinctions were made to provide the necessary tools to analyze political power as manifested by the Roman Empire during the time of Jesus Christ. From a different interpretive angle, these tools have helped me to see the theological perspective regarding religious nationalism, the power of this world, and the power of God manifested through the Kingdom of God. At the end, I presented what the Kingdom of God is, as it is portrayed in the Gospels.

In concluding this analysis, I want to show that the power of God represents a system of values diametrically opposed to the power of this world. These are two distinct powers, differentiated by the way they manifest. The Kingdom of God and the worldly kingdom are contrasted. The Kingdom of God signifies love, justice, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17). The kingdom of this world represents hatred, aggression, and exclusivism manifested through ideologies, extremism, and political power. Christ teaches us to make such distinctions[57], and moreover, He offers us a model of how to relate to ideologies, extremism, and the malefic power of this world, keeping in mind the priorities of the Kingdom of God: to be witnesses of divine love, which represents the power of God.

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[56] Thomas R. Schreiner, 2008, pp. 53 – 60.

[57] Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Trăieşte şi tu după modelul lui Iisus Hristos !" ("Live like Jesus Christ!"), *Argeşul orthodox,* XI, 2012, nr.562, p.5.

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