

LIFE OUTSIDE LIFE

The Politics of Immortality, 1914-1945

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Life Outside Life

The Politics of Immortality, 1914-1945.

Between 1914 and 1945 a discussion took place amongst Christian and Jewish theologians and philosophers on the possibility of immortality and eternal life. The discussion had profound political and metaphysical implications and involved ‘secular’ questions that still haunt contemporary debates on the meaning and origin of life: what is human life and life in general? Where might one locate the border between death and life, and what does it mean to die? Among the participants to this discussion were the Jewish philosopher of religion Franz Rosenzweig, the Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth, the Jewish scholar of myth Oskar Goldberg, and the Catholic historian and Patristic scholar Erik Peterson.

In their own ways these thinkers conceptualised eternal life in response to the dangers of nationalism and the horrors of modern war. In their work we can discern a politics of immortality confronting what the Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén in 1916 called the biopolitics of the modern nation state and what the physician Wilhelm Schallmayer already in 1905 described as *biologische Politik*. The speculative question of eternal life became a way to address the meaning of a good life in a period when millions of lives were being destroyed by war, and in camps and prisons.

This dissertation deals with the intersection between the discussion on immortality and politics in the period between 1914 and 1945, by analysing Rosenzweig, Barth, Goldberg, and Peterson in relation to the racialisation of politics and the politicisation of life during these decades. The approach taken in this study is a contextually informed hermeneutics. In four chapters I discuss how these theologians’ conceptualisations of immortality and eternal life challenged the idea of life that was hegemonic during what has been termed the ‘monistic century’ and the ‘biocentric’ era.

My reading of Rosenzweig, Barth, Goldberg, and Peterson shows on the one hand that their conceptualisations of eternal life and immortality were related to central political concepts and ideas of the era—such as the Darwinian idea of a struggle for survival, or the understanding of immortality as the perpetuation of the human species—and on the other hand that their theologies entail an understanding of life as something that transcends its facticity and points to an exteriority to the domain of biology, culture, history, and nature. For them, the origin of life is something that exceeds the living, and their notions of eternal life and immortality involve a proposal for a community with—and even more *for*—the dead and seemingly nonexistent. This study maintains that it is important to deal with the interactions and intersections of religious and metaphysical ideas, such as immortality and eternal life, with political thought; that one should neither separate theological metaphysics and philosophical anthropology from the domain of politics, nor neglect the cosmological basis of political thinking.

Key words: Karl Barth, Oskar Goldberg, Erik Peterson, Franz Rosenzweig, biocentrism, biopolitics, Christianity, eschatology, eternal life, history of theology, immortality, intellectual history, Judaism, monistic century, philosophy, political ideologies, political theology, religion and politics, resurrection, theology, twentieth-century Germany.

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