

A popular view of contemporary New Zealand politics is that it is devoid of 'religious' dynamics, but the government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic showed that religious ideals, cosmological paradigms, doctrinal discourses, and ritual practices continue to shape political processes. This article analyses themes of transcendence and the sacred in the government's handling of the Covid pandemic, themes that became fundamental to the daily management of the pandemic and its various effects. Drawing on scholarship on political theology, this article explores ideas of solidarity, sacrifice, sovereignty, and the iconic to facilitate a better understanding of the contestations over governance during a time of crisis.

The Political Theology of Covid Governance

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The Covid crisis ended almost as abruptly as it had begun. In late 2022, media reports in New Zealand foregrounded the pandemic on a daily basis; in mid-2023, this is no longer the case. This discursive shift reflects broader cultural and political patterns. While the coronavirus itself has now become endemic, the exceptional governance mechanisms deployed to manage the epidemic have largely concluded. Now that strict Covid restrictions and mandates have been lifted, the time is ripe to begin the task of conducting a post-mortem examination of the national experience of Covid governance. Governmental policy on how to manage the pandemic has been intensely contested, and the task of reflecting on the past three years is inevitably embroiled within these debates. It is therefore important that a range of disciplines and perspectives are brought to bear on the subject. In this article I offer an analysis of the political theology of Covid governance in New Zealand. I explore how ideas of solidarity, sacrifice, sovereignty, and the iconic can help us better understand the politics of governance

during this time of crisis.¹

The term ‘political theology’ can be understood in different ways. I use political theology as an analytical toolbox that affords a fresh examination of the ways in which our politics, even in its apparently most secular guise, remains deeply concerned with the sacred and the transcendent. Against the popular and widespread idea that the decline of Christian affiliation in New Zealand has resulted in a secularised or non-religious public domain, political theology attends to the ways that religious ideals, cosmological paradigms, doctrinal discourses, and ritual practices continue to shape political processes. Political theology is therefore a descriptive and critical lens through which we can analyse the ‘theological’ dynamics that remain stubbornly present at the heart of our contemporary politics. It is one way of analysing the insecure, incomplete, or indeterminate secularity of the New Zealand state.²

Political theology provides two primary ways in which to analyse how the political is shaped by the theological. The first is *genealogical*. This approach traces the historical residue left from earlier theological politics.

1 This article was initially presented as a public talk at St Michael’s Anglican Church in Kelburn, Wellington on 1 June 2022, as part of The Crisis and Freedom Series of public lectures. My thanks especially to Tim McKenzie and Matthew Bartlett for their invitation and encouragement to present a paper at St Michael’s. My dearly loved grandfather, John Fritschi, passed away. Opa, as his whānau knew him, was 100 years old when he contracted Covid. He did not recover from this illness. We continue to greatly miss his cheerful and energetic presence. I think Opa would have enjoyed the argument I present here, although I also don’t doubt he would have relished arguing with me about it. Additional thanks also to Chamsy el-Ojeili, Jack Foster, and Geoff Troughton who read and commented on an earlier draft of this article. Mike Grimshaw and another anonymous reviewer provided a valuable review of the article; Mike’s comments were particularly generative and led to numerous revisions. I am also grateful for the editors’ helpful advice in revising the paper.

2 For further discussion of the ‘insecure’ secularity of the New Zealand state, using a different set of analytical tools from this paper, see Geoff Troughton and Philip Fountain, ‘An Insecure Secularity? Religion, Decolonisation and Diversification in Aotearoa New Zealand’, *The Round Table* 112 (2023, forthcoming). On the ‘irrevocable indeterminacy’ of secularism, see also Husain Ali Agrama, ‘Secularism, Sovereignty, Indeterminacy: Is Egypt a Secular or a Religious State?’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 52, no. 3 (2010): 500.

This residue remains potent and influential. For example, we could think about how ideas of human rights have important antecedents in Christian theologies of humanity, which locate humans as made in the image of God and therefore deserving justice and attention. Those espousing human rights don't need to see themselves as Christian or to adhere to a Christian confession in order to nevertheless make use of ideas drawn from Christian theology.³ The theological history of concepts continue to haunt the present, and it is possible to trace their itineraries.

The second analytical approach provided by political theology is *functional*. This approach is less interested in the history of ideas than with the function and operations of politics. If politics is a domain that invokes the sacred or transcendent, operates as if it had a divine mandate, presumes a cosmological (Manichean dualist) division of the world into a good side (normally 'us') and a bad side (normally 'them'), is about ultimate things like life and death, then politics can be seen as functioning in what we could call a 'religious' way. To return to the human rights example: if the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) operates as a sacrosanct and inviolable totem, which is recorded in creed-like fashion and demands our unbending adherence, then for all intents and purposes the UDHR is sacred and transcendent; it functions theologically on a parallel with, say, faith in God.⁴

These two approaches—tracing the genealogical residue of theological ideas and examining the sacred functions of politics—both provide helpful ways of overcoming the wrongheaded idea that 'religion' in a country like New Zealand has nothing to do with politics. Both approaches challenge the idea that religion is a clearly demarcated, cordoned-off, or immured sphere of activity, involving only minority groups predominantly within privatised and domesticated spaces. Political theology assumes that we should expect to encounter the theological in unexpected places.

3 On the Christian theological shaping of contemporary ideas of human rights see, for example, Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (New York: Basic Books, 2019).

4 This argument is advanced by Stephen Hopgood, *The Endtimes of Human Rights* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

For political theology, politics is not at heart a rational weighing of costs and benefits. Nor is it a matter of carefully considering contrasting and competing policy options. Politics is not primarily about administration or institutional arrangements. Instead, politics is about desire and hope, existential anxiety, defeating enemies, binding the national community together, demands for sacrifice, and promises of salvation.⁵ Politics is, at heart, about cultivating and attending to the sacred.

My approach to political theology becomes clearer when I contrast it with two other possible strategies. My use of political theology is not the same as studying ‘religious politics’, where the latter explores how religious communities influence and shape political processes. An examination of ‘religious politics’ is based on the idea that religious communities are the only ones concerned with the sacred, whereas political theology presumes that we are all invested in sacredness, even if we have different imaginations about what it might be.

My use of political theology also differs from the approach of ‘political theologians’ who critique politics on the basis of a normative theological ethic. Political theologians seek to correct, advise, or re-shape politics. They are concerned with what *should* happen, measured according to how a theologian understands the purposes of God or the ‘grain of the universe’. This approach can also be called ‘public theology’. The contributions of political theologians are important, irrespective of whether others share their theological commitments. We need normative visions to critique our present arrangements and to help imagine alternative possibilities. But this theological practice is not my approach in this article. It is not primarily my

5 On these themes see Giuseppe Bolotta, Philip Fountain and R. Michael Feener, ‘Transcendence, Sacrifice, and Aspiration: The Political Theology of Development in Asia’, in *Political Theologies and Development in Asia: Transcendence, Sacrifice and Aspiration*, eds. Giuseppe Bolotta, Philip Fountain, and R. Michael Feener (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 1–17.

intent to correct things, but rather I attempt to describe them.⁶

A viral crisis

Before I turn to address what political theology can contribute to our understanding of Covid governance in New Zealand, I first want to offer some brief reflections on the pandemic itself, as I am interested in the study of religion and disasters⁷ Disasters are ‘event-processes’ that disrupt the patterns of ordinary life.⁸ Earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, and forest fires are all natural hazards; when one such event crashes into a vulnerable human community, leaving devastation in its wake, we call it a ‘disaster’. Disasters are always related to religion; and not only because we sometimes call them ‘acts of God’ or because the word ‘disaster’ derives from Latin roots meaning ‘a misalignment of the stars’. The moment of crisis is an existential threat, which raises profound questions about death, life, hope, fear, and salvation.

For the past three years we have lived through a prolonged ‘moment’ of global crisis. Covid-19 has been a disaster, which has overwhelmed

6 I readily acknowledge that descriptions and prescriptions are often not so sharply juxtaposed and can blur together in practice. For further discussion of these issues, see Philip Fountain, Douglas Hynd, and Tobias Tan, ‘Theology, Anthropology, and the Invocation to be Otherwise’, *St Mark’s Review* 244 (2020): 9–20. Nevertheless, the primary project of this article is descriptive. The matter of ‘solutions’ (including arguments about what these solutions may be or even whether solutions are conceivable for the conundrums I discuss), is beyond the scope of my argument.

7 See especially, Philip Fountain, Sara Louise Kindon, and Warwick E. Murray, ‘Christianity, Calamity, and Culture: The Involvement of Christian Churches in the 1998 Aitape Tsunami Disaster Relief’, *The Contemporary Pacific* 16, no. 2 (2004): 321–355; Philip Fountain, Robin Bush and R. Michael Feener, ‘Religious Actors in Disaster Relief: An Introduction’, *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 33, no. 2 (2015): 1–16; Philip Fountain and Levi McLaughlin, ‘Salvage and Salvation: An Introduction’, *Asian Ethnology* 75, no. 1 (2016): 1–28; Philip Fountain, ‘Mennonite Disaster Relief and the Interfaith Encounter in Aceh, Indonesia’, *Asian Ethnology* 75, no. 1 (2016): 163–190.

8 Anthony Oliver-Smith, ‘Anthropology in Disasters: Local Knowledge, Knowledge of the Local, and Expert Knowledge’, in *Disasters, Development and Humanitarian Aid: New Challenges for Anthropology*, ed. Mara Benadusi, Chiara Brambilla, and Bruno Riccio (Rimini: Guaraldi, 2011), 26.

and devastated communities around the world. The first infections were reported only in late 2019 in Wuhan, China. As of July 2023, there have been well over 750 million official cases and almost seven million official deaths.⁹ Some people who contract the virus develop long Covid, meaning that they continue to live with the effects of the virus long after the initial illness.¹⁰ Lives have been disrupted in all sorts of profound ways, and we are only just beginning to understand what the consequences of these disruptions will be.

New Zealand has had 2.4 million cases of Covid, with 3,159 deaths attributed to the virus.¹¹ Most of these cases and deaths were recorded since January 2022. New Zealanders were required to practice social distancing and use masks in public places. We have experienced lengthy lockdowns, involving sharp restrictions on mobility and social interactions. Auckland's longest lockdown lasted for a gruelling 107 days. Schools, religious services, and community groups were physically closed for significant stretches across the country. There were also sharp restrictions on international travel, including the implementation of Managed Isolation and Quarantine (MIQ) and a mandatory quarantine system for new arrivals. Ninety percent of New Zealand's eligible population has been vaccinated with the Pfizer vaccine.¹² Vaccines were mandated in some occupations. Between 3 December 2021 and 4 April 2022, and vaccine passports known as My Vaccine Pass were required for physical access to a wide range of facilities, shops, and services.

Covid was a crisis, but it was a crisis with distinctive characteristics. It

9 'WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard', World Health Organization, accessed July 10, 2023, covid19.who.int.

10 Destin Groff et al., 'Short-term and Long-term Rates of Postacute Sequelae of SARS-CoV-2 Infection: A Systematic Review', *JAMA Network* 4, no. 10 (2021): e2128568.

11 'COVID-19: Current cases', Ministry of Health, accessed July 10, 2023, <https://www.health.govt.nz/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-data-and-statistics/covid-19-current-cases>

12 'COVID-19 data and statistics', Unite Against COVID-19, <https://covid19.govt.nz/news-and-data/covid-19-data-and-statistics/#vaccinations-uptake-in-NZ>

was an *unprecedented* crisis.¹³ The scale of infection and speed of transmission were extraordinary. At the start of the crisis there was no road map for how to navigate the pandemic. As a country we have spent decades preparing for earthquakes; the government had just days to develop a response to Covid.

It was a *medical or health* crisis. The SARS-CoV-2 was a novel coronavirus, not previously known to be transmittable among humans. Humans became the primary vector for the virus. As a health crisis the pandemic spurred a response in New Zealand that heavily relied on medical and scientific expertise.

It was an *evolving* crisis. The virus mutated over time. The rise of different variants reconfigured the circulation and severity of the disease. This fact, alongside growing knowledge of the virus, new medical capacities (especially the development and mass manufacture of vaccines in late 2020), and changing government strategies resulted in very different experiences of the pandemic over time. The emotional mood of the country also shifted over time. In March 2020, New Zealanders put teddy bears in our windows and we walked down eerily empty streets. In March 2022, Parliament grounds were burning and protesters were being forcibly removed by the police.

It was an *uneven* crisis. Covid-19 does not affect all groups equally. Due to various social and economic circumstances, certain groups are more vulnerable than others, including the elderly, Māori, Pasifika, and disabled people. Medical capacity is not evenly distributed around New Zealand, or around the world.¹⁴ As of May 2022, only 57 countries had been able to vaccinate 70% or more of their population; almost all of these were high-income countries.¹⁵ Different governments have responded differently to

13 While New Zealand has, of course, been affected by other viral epidemics, Covid-19 remains distinctive in the contemporary era for the extent of its direct and indirect impacts.

14 In December 2021, while New Zealand was administering booster shots of the Pfizer vaccine, 80% of people living in the African continent had yet to receive a single dose. Munyaradzi Makoni. 'The Quest for More COVID-19 Vaccinations in Africa', *The Lancet* 10 (July 2022): e70–e71.

15 'COVID-19 vaccines', World Health Organization, <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/covid-19-vaccines>

the virus, resulting in different outcomes for their citizens.

It was also a *compound* crisis. This is another way of saying that Covid was not the only crisis we faced. We also faced an ongoing ecological crisis, including the growing threat of irreversible anthropogenic global climate change.¹⁶ Prior to Covid, our medical system was already in a crisis of inadequate resourcing. We are in the midst of a severe mental health crisis. We have a crisis of growing economic inequality. In 2023, we face crises of housing affordability and sharply rising costs of living. We are in a crisis of trust in the media and political institutions. The Christchurch Mosque Attacks took place in 2019; and when the pandemic began we were still mourning the loss of life. The pandemic combined with, and exacerbated, many of these other crises.

So, what does political theology have to say about our experience of Covid governance over the past three years? What follows is a prolegomenon—an introductory exploration. I seek to open the topic up for further conversation. In this political theology of Covid governance, I think through some key concepts to trace the stubborn presence of the sacred in the politics of this crisis. By reflecting on ideas of solidarity, sovereignty, sacrifice, and the iconic, I seek to explore the sacred in the heart of New Zealand politics.

Solidarity

Community is central to acts commemorating the sacred. Émile Durkheim famously argued that when religious communities meet to worship a god,

16 The March 2023 IPCC Synthesis Report clearly states that human-caused climate change is affecting weather and climate extremes across the globe with widespread adverse impacts. See 'AR6 Synthesis Report: Climate Change 2023', Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Jonathan Boston argues that given the severity of the climate crisis, the government should adopt a 'war footing', involving a radical reconfiguration of political governance. Jonathan Boston, in conversation with Rayne Aldridge and Mika Herval, 'How to Face the Climate Crisis with Dr. Jonathan Boston', *The Happy Revolution*, February 13, 2023, <https://open.spotify.com/episode/6T-thV385zX9xr06wkjct5M>

what they are really doing is reinforcing their collective bonds.¹⁷ We don't need to be as reductive as this to nevertheless recognise the powerful ways in which ritual practices bind communities together. In *Redeeming the Broken Body*, Gabriel Santos analyses the processes of rebuilding community in the aftermath of American disasters.¹⁸ Santos sees disasters as invaluable 'windows' to explore cultural and political dynamics. He focuses his analysis on the contrasting rituals of state and church. For Santos, a disaster is an existential challenge that threatens to break a community apart. In response, leaders enact public liturgies in order to re-member, or re-compose, the social body. In their speeches in the wake of disasters, American politicians consistently reach for strikingly theological language, including talk of God, sin, evil, and resurrection. In so doing, Santos argues, the state seeks to unite its citizens under a common imaginative banner.

Explicitly theological language is generally less conspicuous in New Zealand public life than it is in the United States. These days, there isn't usually much talk of God or sin from our politicians. But in response to Covid, the New Zealand Government also engaged in strategies of remembering the social body by using languages of solidarity and unity. In their daily press briefings, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and Director-General of Health Ashley Bloomfield repeatedly used the sporting metaphor of being a 'team of five million' and they emphasised that 'we're in this together'.¹⁹ Ardern and Bloomfield located empathy at the heart of their politics, and they asked New Zealanders to be 'be kind' to each other. They emphasised solidarity in order to build up a social body threatened not only by the virus itself but also by the government's own requirements for social distancing and mandated vaccinations.

17 Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1964 [1915]): 205-214.

18 Gabriel Santos, *Redeeming the Broken Body: Church and State after Disaster* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade, 2009). The three disasters analysed by Santos are: the 1995 Oklahoma City Bombing, the '9/11' attacks on the World Trade Center, and the devastation of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans in 2005.

19 Alex Beattie and Rebecca Priestley, 'Fighting COVID-19 with the Team of 5 million: Aotearoa New Zealand Government Communication during the 2020 Lock-down', *Social Sciences & Humanities Open* 4, no. 1 (2021): 100209.

Themes of unity and unification were central to government communication strategies.²⁰ The government worked with advertising company Clemenger BBDO in the design of the ‘Unite Against Covid-19’ communication strategy. These messages of unity flooded radio, television, and digital media. John Walsh, who was involved in putting this strategy together, has said that he sought to make the government website on Covid-19 ‘the single source of truth’ for information on the virus in NZ.²¹ A key component of this ‘truth’ was a political sermon about the value and necessity of communal solidarity.

Discourses of unity can enable powerful social group cohesion. But they can also afford space, and even necessitate, the creation of external adversaries; a tightly-bounded ‘us’ requires a ‘them’. Annemarie Jutel argues that this was the case for New Zealand’s Covid strategy. Its emphasis on team solidarity created social exclusions: ‘For the “team of five million”, every potential assault on the disease-free status of their nation assembles (worthy) citizens more tightly—and unites them against others’.²² Jutel argues that these logics of exclusion help explain bitter social media and talk-back exchanges where particular groups were identified as ‘not us’, including those who were perceived as failing to maintain social distancing rules and newly-arrived returnees who were seen as potential threats as possible carriers of the virus.

Richard Shaw argues that the ‘team of five million’ language built upon the myth of an egalitarian New Zealand past, including the idea that ‘we

20 Blair Cameron, ‘Captaining the Team of 5 Million: New Zealand Beats Back Covid-19, March-June 2020’, *Innovations for Successful Societies*, Princeton School of Public and International Affairs.

21 Cameron, ‘Captaining’, 4.

22 Annemarie Jutel, “‘In This Together’: Diagnosis and the Imaginary Nation”, *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 64, no. 3 (2021): 339–351; Annemarie Jutel, ‘The Patriotic Power of Words like “Team”’, Newsroom, 25 August 2021.

are all one people'.²³ But, Shaw warns:

Life here has rarely approximated the self-serving egalitarian myth that is the nation's origin story (least of all for Māori), and which is the closest thing we have to a sense of exceptionalism. . . . There is no question Ardern's catchphrase has been a great rallying cry. But neither can there be any doubt it obscures the extent to which we are not really a team at all.

Shaw argues that 'the forced cohesion of the team of 5 million' actively suppressed New Zealanders who are seen as not being a part of the in-group.

Discourses of solidarity, and insiders and outsiders, flow into conceptual demarcations between purity and pollution. The purity–pollution dynamic is an especially potent frame when considering a deadly viral contagion. Disease is a pollution that threatens the wholeness and wellbeing of the social body. The construction of virus-inhibiting measures such as social distancing, quarantine, and lockdowns were therefore also attempts at purification. These purifying steps sought to cleanse the community of the disease.

Ideas of purity and pollution easily morph from epidemiology into social relations. This was apparent, for example, with the public response following the discovery of a cluster of cases connected with the Samoan Assemblies of God Māngere church in South Auckland in August 2021.²⁴ It was striking how quickly responses descended into deeply racist attacks on

23 Richard Shaw, 'A year on from New Zealand's big lockdown the "team of 5 million" needs a new story', *The Conversation* 24 March 2021. It is also worth noting that this sporting phrase closely mirrors the language deployed by former prime ministers Helen Clark and John Key in the successful bid for New Zealand to host the 2011 Rugby World Cup, in which the country was framed as 'the stadium of four million'. See Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, *The Stadium of Four Million: Rugby World Cup 2011: The New Zealand Experience* (Wellington, Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, 2012), accessed 3 May 2023.

24 Torika Tokalau, 'Covid-19: 58 Cases Linked to Pacific Church Event, NZ's Largest Sub-Cluster', *Stuff*, 24 August 2021.

Pacific communities, who were situated as failing to keep the rules.²⁵ This racism suggests that Pacific peoples were perceived by some as outsiders and as potential polluters of the social body.

The construction of sharp boundaries separating Kiwis from the disease required high levels of public compliance. They also required regulation and enforcement. Former Police Commissioner Mike Bush stated that the police sought to avoid confrontation with the public whenever possible.²⁶ The police adopted a four E's strategy: engage, encourage, educate and, only as a last resort, enforce. According to Bush: 'It was only when people were persistent, serious, repeat offenders that we would use enforcement powers'. Nevertheless, by mid-2020, 400 breaches of level 4 restrictions had been prosecuted.

It is with this background of purity and pollution in mind that we need to understand the prime minister's description of those who flouted lockdown rules as 'idiots'.²⁷ These rule-breakers were condemned for having foolishly violated the purity of the social body. It is also with this dynamic in mind that we need to recall the themes and emphases in the prime minister's speech on 2 March 2022, the day the parliamentary protestors were forcefully removed after three weeks of occupation. In the press conference, Ardern repeatedly referenced the 'small group' of protestors and differentiated them from the rest of New Zealand society. Describing the protest as a 'desecration' of parliamentary grounds, Ardern declared that it was 'an attack on our values'. She said the protest 'stands against . . . who we are as people'. The protestors were portrayed as betraying New Zealand: 'this is not the way that we engage and protest'.²⁸ Ardern went on to say:

25 Torika Tokalau and Florence Kerr, 'Covid-19: Singling Out one Ethnicity in Team of 5 million "Unhelpful", Pacific Leader Aays', *Stuff*, 25 August 2021; Justin Latif, "'God Bless Them": Church at Centre of Latest Outbreak Brushes off Racist Abuse', *Stuff*, 26 August 2021.

26 Cameron, 'Captaining', 21-22.

27 On 5 April 2020, Jacinda Ardern said of lockdown violators: 'I would charitably describe [them] as idiots'. Cameron, 'Captaining', 22.

28 Stewart Sowman-Lund, 'PM Condemns "Attack on our Values" at Parliament as Clashes Continue', *The Spinoff*, 2 March, 2022.

‘There has all the way through been an element to this occupation that has not felt like New Zealand; and that’s because it’s not. There has been foreign influence in what we’ve seen . . . in terms of the disinformation that has been sourced out from other countries’. In this description, the parliamentary protestors are painted as foreigners that risked infecting the national body with their polluting ideas. The government’s emphasis on unity and solidarity, therefore, in the face of external, polluting threats is central to its political theology of Covid governance, even while the language of unity produced its own discontents.

Sacrifice

Alongside themes of solidarity and unity is that of sacrifice. This is perhaps the most obviously ‘religious’ word used in government statements around Covid. Politicians repeatedly called on New Zealanders to sacrifice for the health of the community. Resorting to languages of sacrifice was not coincidental. Notions of sacrifice are central to New Zealand’s implicit civil religion. Our birthplace as a nation is said to have begun in the bloody baptism of Anzac troops at Gallipoli. Stories of Gallipoli helped furnish a growing sense of distinctiveness for the dominion, and the trauma of war provided powerful logics of solidarity that fuelled a growing nationalist imagination. The Anzac ‘sacrifice’ is remembered every year in what can be regarded as the default national day.²⁹ This is not unique to New Zealand, of course—sacrifice is a sacred source of authority for many nation-states, where killing and dying for the nation is a patriotic duty.³⁰ Ideas of sacrifice also surround the founding national myth of hard-working settlers who gave of themselves to establish farms and build cities that are enjoyed today.

29 Philippa Mein Smith, ‘The “NZ” in Anzac: Different Remembrance and Meaning’, *First World War Studies* 7, no. 2 (2016): 193–211; C. Michael Hall, ‘ANZAC Day and Secular Pilgrimage’, *Tourism Recreation Research* 27, no. 2 (2002): 83–87.

30 William Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Paul Kahn, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

New Zealand's sportsmen and sportswomen are frequently exalted for their sacrifices to be competitive in their chosen field. This sacrificial ethic is epitomised in the mythologies surrounding the All Blacks, arguably the high priests of New Zealand's national faith.³¹ These narratives of sacrifice have clear genealogies within Christian theology. It is therefore notable, as we are frequently told, that while contemporary New Zealand doesn't do religion, we nevertheless continue to revel in sacrifice.

In the time of Covid we were called again to do our part in what the government called the 'go hard, go early' approach. The language of sacrifice is a dominant strand of the political theology of Covid governance. The concept of sacrifice was central for Jacinda Ardern's appeals to the nation. In April 2020, still in the early stages of governmental response to the pandemic, Ardern stated: 'The sacrifice made to date has been huge'.³² When, in June 2020, Ardern declared New Zealand 'virus-free' and (temporarily) dropped restrictions, she told the public: 'This was what the sacrifice of our team of five million was for—to keep one another safe and to keep one another well'.³³ In her speech on 2 March 2022, the day protestors were removed from Parliament, Ardern positioned the protestors against the majority of New Zealanders who had upheld the team spirit in sacrificing for the common good: 'The sacrifices we were all willing to make to look after one another, that is what will define us, no protest, no fire, no placards will ever change that'.³⁴ Here, collective sacrifice is taken as our

31 In 1986, All Black flanker Mark Shaw captured this quality perfectly when he is reputed to have told debutant Mike Brewer: 'Son, you've got to be prepared to piss blood to wear this jersey'. See Orange Hippo!, *The Little Book of New Zealand Rugby: Told in Their Own Words* (London: Orange Hippos!, 2021). Consider also the drastic step of Richard 'Red' Conway, who had a broken finger amputated so that he could join the 1960 All Black tour of South Africa. See Neil Reid, "'Red' Conway: Rugby star Who had Finger Amputated to Make the All Blacks Dies", *New Zealand Herald*, 27 May 2022.

32 'Prime Minister's Remarks on COVID-19 Alert Level Decision—April 20', New Zealand Government, 20 April 2020.

33 Charlotte Graham-McLay, 'New Zealand Drops Covid-19 Restrictions after Nation Declared 'Virus-Free'', *The Guardian*, 8 June 2020.

34 RNZ, 'PM Jacinda Ardern on Violence outside Parliament: "We Will Restore these Grounds"', *RNZ*, 2 March 2022.

defining characteristic; indeed, it is given an eternal and inalterable status. Later in March 2022, when announcing a new award recognising people who had contributed to New Zealand’s Covid-19 response, with MIQ staff as its first recipients, Ardern said: ‘Our MIQ workforce has demonstrated care and professionalism, often at considerable personal risk and sacrifice and are worthy recipients of this award and our gratitude’.³⁵

Other government ministers also regularly deployed the language of sacrifice. In early 2021, Deputy Prime Minister Grant Robertson applauded ‘the hard work and sacrifice that New Zealanders collectively put in across 2020’.³⁶ In December 2021, Attorney-General David Parker drew attention to the sacrifice of civil liberties during the pandemic:

Unity—the ‘team of five million’—was the basic building block to maintain confidence, which in turn required compliance with the law—legal compulsions that impact civil liberties. . . . Social distancing, checking-in, mask wearing, testing, vaccination, lock downs, closed borders and MIQ, have enormously disrupted going about our daily lives. The sacrifice has been burdensome. That we, together, have achieved a world class response is tribute to the tenacity of our people and the strength of our community.³⁷

Parker’s repeated connection of sacrifice and community is notable. In her book *Throughout Your Generations Forever*, Nancy Jay reflects on how the word ‘atonement’ can also be read as ‘at-one-ment’.³⁸ She argues that this coincidence of the English language points to something central about the logics of sacrifice. Sacrifice, for Jay, ‘joins people together in community and separates them from defilement, disease, and other dangers’. Sacrifice

35 ‘New Award Recognises MIQ staff’, New Zealand Government, 10 March 2022.

36 ‘Government Remains Focused on Building Back Better’, New Zealand Government, 9 February 2021.

37 ‘The legal and constitutional implications of New Zealand’s fight against COVID’, New Zealand Government, 2 December 2021.

38 Nancy Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion, and Paternity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992): 17–19.

involves suffering and pain which is transformed into new life for the community that remains.

I take the tensions over Covid governance that wracked New Zealand in the first half of 2022 to be primarily a matter of disagreement over the nature and distribution of sacrifice. Some argued that their bodily autonomy or freedom of movement should not be sacrificed for the goal of restricting Covid. Some believed they have borne the harsh brunt of the national sacrifice, while others have paid only a relatively small price. Yet others thought that the economic sacrifice of government restrictions has been too great a price to pay, when so many livelihoods depend on it.

While the government's strategies have indeed borne uneven costs, the major alternatives also carried a heavy price. A 'natural herd immunity' approach, for example, necessarily sacrifices the lives of vulnerable groups for the economic survival of the majority.³⁹ Like some blood-thirsty monster, Covid-19 was always going to take a toll; the theo-political question was how this toll was to be paid and who was going to pay it.

Jacinda Ardern's shock resignation in January 2023 took New Zealand, and the world, by surprise. Many asked why such a dynamic and capable leader would step away from the prime ministership while still at the height of her success. Ardern said at the time that she didn't have 'enough in the tank to do the job justice' and she indicated that she wanted to spend time with her partner and daughter: 'Arguably, they're the ones who have sacrificed the most'.⁴⁰ But it is also true that Ardern herself had become a scapegoat for people seeking to vent their frustrations with the Covid response. Ardern was repeatedly the target of toxic, vehement, and vicious verbal abuse, both online and by protestors. Much of this vitriol was sexist and misogynistic.⁴¹ The rhetorical violence focused on Ardern, such that

39 Btihaj Ajana, 'Immunitarianism: Defence and Sacrifice in the Politics of Covid-19', *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences* 43, no. 1 (2021): 25.

40 Jonny Mahon-Heap, 'Jacinda Ardern Didn't Have "Enough Left in the Tank"—How to Tell When You're Running on Empty', *Stuff*, 19 January 2023.

41 Suze Wilson, 'From "Pretty Communist" to "Jacinda"—What's Behind the Vitriol Directed at Jacinda Ardern?' *The Conversation*, 16 March 2022; Chris Wilson, 'How Data Shines a Light on the Online Hatred for Jacinda Ardern', *Stuff*, 24 January 2023.

she was made to carry the blame for Covid disruption. This reading frames Ardern as a sacrificial victim. Accordingly, her resignation can be seen as the culmination of this sacrificial rite, through which the country was enabled to put an end to the Covid crisis and return back to ‘normal’ life.

Sovereignty

Sovereignty is a classic and enduring theme in political theological analysis. Carl Schmitt is a seminal theorist in political theology, and he famously argued that the ‘state of exception’ is analogous to the miracle in Christian theology; the disruption of the normal rules of nature or government points to the presence of sovereign power.⁴² So, for Schmitt, ‘Sovereign is he who decides on the exception’.⁴³ During times of war or disaster a government can declare a ‘state of exception’ or a ‘state of emergency’ during which constitutional rights are suspended. For Schmitt, because a constitution can be suspended it cannot therefore be the final source of sovereignty. Instead, sovereignty belongs to the actor that can suspend the law when and where it decides to. This capacity renders the state as a metaphysical entity; like God, the state can choose which laws it will conform to and which laws it will flout. Sovereignty, for Schmitt, is a matter of decision and domination. Schmitt also understands sovereignty as indivisible and absolute. The state alone can be sovereign, just as monotheism requires obedience to the one, true God.

Keeping this mind, the New Zealand case during Covid presents us with a complicated and interesting picture. On the one hand, the New Zealand government clearly declared a ‘state of exception’ during the pandemic. Over two and half years, rights were suspended and activities that were normally protected by law were disallowed. The divine-like power of the sovereign state is exhibited in its capacity to suspend the usual operation of the Bill of Rights. But on the other hand, the New Zealand government is

42 Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985 [1922]).

43 Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 5.

not the only actor that declared a state of exception, nor is it the only actor that claims sovereignty. New Zealand is in the midst of a long, contested conversation about the implications of Te Tiriti o Waitangi for the nation today. Some of this conversation concerns what is now framed around issues of ‘co-governance’. The active practice of rangatiratanga by Māori is an important consideration for the political theology of Covid governance.

In their book *Stepping Up: Covid-19 Checkpoints and Rangatiratanga*, Luke Fitzmaurice and Maria Bargh analyse the checkpoints established by Māori communities during the pandemic.⁴⁴ They focus on four case studies selected from the dozens of similar checkpoints set up across the country. These checkpoints were established by Māori to protect the health of their communities. Some of these checkpoints were quite permeable, resulting in little actual restriction but giving an opportunity to disseminate public health messages and check in on people. Others could be quite strict. One checkpoint established in Ngataki, north of Kaitaia, supported by Te Aupōuri and Ngāti Kurī, sought to block anyone who was not hau kāinga (living in the area) from entering. This included restricting police from entering unless they could provide good reason, and denying access to whānau who lived elsewhere, even if they sought to come home for a tangi/funeral.

These checkpoints were established by Māori according to tikanga and relying on the mana of the tangata whenua. The communities that established the checkpoints did not wait for permission from the government to do so. Initially, for some of these checkpoints, there was some tension with police over their legitimacy. Over time, however, police gave the checkpoints tacit or even active support and assistance. For Fitzmaurice and Bargh, the checkpoints provide a clear example of rangatiratanga in practice:

In all four case studies, Māori were in no doubt about whether they had the authority to take action. All four exercised rangatiratanga and drew on tikanga as their source of authority. . . . The

⁴⁴ Luke Fitzmaurice and Maria Bargh, *Stepping Up: Covid-19 Checkpoints and Rangatiratanga* (Wellington: Huia Publishers, 2021), 61–62.

checkpoints were an example of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples recognising each other as equals, valuing political diversity and independence, and . . . exercising a degree of self-government that was supported.

Here too, therefore, are examples of sovereign ‘states of exception’ in which usual operations of law are suspended and reconfigured.

Schmitt’s contention that sovereignty is located at precisely these moments of decision in response to crisis strongly suggests that, in practice, sovereignty in New Zealand is not just a matter of the authority of the Crown. The checkpoints illustrate the contested nature of parliamentary sovereignty in New Zealand. That the police entered into partnership with Māori over the operation of these checkpoints also indicates that the Crown (or at least parts thereof) is aware of the competing sovereignties, notably in the midst of the Covid pandemic where it was exerting its authority in unprecedented ways.

It is important to consider what this suggests about the ongoing governance of Aotearoa New Zealand. The practical operation of multiple sovereignties and associated contested lines of authority poses significant challenges. Risks abound as questions accumulate about overlapping jurisdictions, distribution of resources, lines of accountability, and democratic participation. But there are good reasons to have considerable hope that the journey forward is a good and worthwhile one. In any case, the risks don’t dissipate if we shove our heads into the sand and wish it all away.

Those who want to cling to the idea of a single source of national sovereignty run the danger of taking Schmitt’s political theology as prescriptive rather than descriptive. Schmitt was right to posit sovereignty as analogous to divinity. As the postcolonial New Zealand case suggests, however, it is mistaken to assume that sovereignty must be dogmatically monotheistic, as other theo-political models are possible than just strict mono-sovereignty.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ This assumption is mistaken also in European history, where a ruler’s authority had clearly proscribed limits, including in relation to ecclesial authority.

Trinitarian theology establishes a complex mathematics, where one equals three and vice versa, thereby framing divinity as both multiple and singular in its perichoretic relationality. A polytheist sovereignty can expand the political-theological horizons in multiple and diverse trajectories. We don't need to be strict monotheists when it comes to government. The problem is not numerical, but rather relational. How will different sovereignties relate with each other? The primary issue therefore concerns how Māori and tauīwi want these sovereignties to relate to each other.

Sacred Icons

Aesthetics is the final space in which I consider the political theology of Covid governance. In the Catholic and Orthodox traditions of Christianity, sacred icons are generally understood as 'entrances into the presence of the Holy' or as 'windows to heaven'.⁴⁶ Icons allow people to access the invisible sacred in tangible, material ways, because they are visual representations that encapsulate and express dense and intense emotions. They are frequently endowed with wondrous powers and exude a sacred aura, and they provide spiritual, physical, and psychological comfort. While some icons are created and endorsed by institutional authorities, others are birthed in a milieu of folk piety and exist as expressions of popular religious fervour. Icons bring their viewers to the sacred. The political theology of Covid

46 Much of the language in this paragraph is borrowed from Chris J. Chulos, 'Icons in Motion: Sacred Aura and Religious Identity in Late Tsarist Russia', *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 23, no. 2 (2012): 176–211. For further discussion of iconicity in the study of material religion, see Kim Knott, Volkhard Krech, and Birgit Meyer, 'Iconic Religion in Urban Space', *Material Religion* 12, no. 2 (2016): 123–136.

governance was very much about aesthetics, imagery, and materiality.⁴⁷ The careful deployment of visual imagery has marked key points of the Covid crisis. Covid is invisible to the naked eye, but iconic representations allow us to perceive the imperceptible.

‘1pm Press Conferences’ are the first iconic form I want to discuss. These televised events became a daily ritual for many across New Zealand. They provided a moment of focus as people attentively viewed 2D digital representations transmitted ‘live’ to their screens. We waited on them with bated breath because we knew that major changes in Covid governance would be announced first in these forums. These theatrical performances therefore had enormous implications for the lived experience of the pandemic. They were also a visual spectacle that celebrated scientific expertise, biomedicine, Big ‘D’ Data and Big ‘F’ Facts, rational deliberation, and empathy. They were exceedingly, overwhelmingly Big ‘S’ Sincere.

In his ode to the Covid press conference, published in the *New Zealand Herald*, Steve Braunias notes that: ‘There was something very ancient about it’.⁴⁸ I would add that there was also something very priestly. Braunias regards them as ‘beautifully crafted’ and yet also austere, which befit the discussion of matters of life and death. Braunias acknowledges that they were blatant Labour propaganda, and yet he also celebrates how they freed us from the burden of incessant political debate: ‘So much of it was about politics and yet it resisted politics. It was about the most important thing: health’. Braunias also noted that the press conferences made a star of Ashley Bloomfield, initiating a new popular ‘cult of the director-general of health’. Bloomfield became a Covid katechon as he held back the viral apocalypse

47 On the materiality of political theology, see Eli Elinoff, ‘From Blood, Cast in Cement: Materialising the Political in Thailand’, in *Political Theologies and Development in Asia: Transcendence, Sacrifice, and Aspiration*, eds., Giuseppe Bolotta, Philip Fountain, and R. Michael Feener (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 68–86; Kenneth M George, ‘The Theopolitics of Art: Qur’anic Objects and Their Publics in Indonesia’, in *Political Theologies*, 87–103; Edoardo Siani, ‘Embodying the Late King: Buddhist Salvation and the Sacrifice of Sovereignty at a Bangkok mall’, in *Political Theologies*, 104–118.

48 Steve Braunias, ‘An Ode to the 1pm Covid Press Conferences—“A Long, Strange Trip”’, *New Zealand Herald*, 16 April 2022.

armed only with a calm presence, statistics, and a doctor's tone of concern.

A second icon can be summarised by the motto 'In Data We Trust'. Covid has seen the emergence of a revived faith in the capacities and the reliability of data crunchers. The latest Covid statistics were read out, recited, and discussed as vital and indispensable knowledge. Displays of quantitative data became ubiquitous in 1pm Press Conferences and they proliferated across newspaper, television and online media as well as in government websites. Graphs enabled us to understand what we couldn't see with our own eyes. They incarnated the truth that an invisible disease was lurking just outside our doors. Covid also gave space for a new kind of prophet who was capable of reading the tea leaves of the present in order to predict the future. The Covid modellers weren't always right; few prophets are able to maintain an entirely consistent record of their predictions. But we listened to them eagerly. We paid attention to every single whisper about future portents. They gave us hope; and they shattered our dreams. This was all rendered accessible by bar graphs and hard numbers.

Hand sanitiser is my third icon. Focusing on hand sanitiser shifts our attention to considering questions of how Covid governance was always concerned with the organisation, compartment, and reconfiguration of corporeality—hand sanitiser wasn't just something we looked at, but it was also a sludgy and oddly cooling substance that was felt and experienced.⁴⁹ Over the course of the pandemic hand sanitiser became a key sacrament, a ritual washing of hands in a clear, oozing, protective coating. The gift of receiving hand sanitiser became incorporated as part of the ritual of crossing over liminal entry points into other spaces. You could find hand sanitiser at the doorways of supermarkets, offices, churches, classrooms, and gyms. The use of hand sanitiser is distinctly reminiscent of that most sacred rite of summer: the daily application of sunscreen. Like sunscreen, hand sanitiser washes us in this magic protective layer of security and comfort.

49 For Tobias Tanton, questions of theology are always also questions of corporeality. He argues that theological understanding is 'the purview of *embodied* creatures' such that '*theology is corporeal*' (emphases in original). Tobias Tanton, *Corporeal Theology: Accommodating Theological Understanding to Embodied Thinkers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 2–3.

On particularly blessed occasions it was accompanied by a gentle whiff of scented lavender.

At the same doorways that you found a bottle of hand sanitiser, one could also locate printed posters with QR codes on them. For a time, the scanning-in of QR codes, my fourth icon, was a necessary part of entering into all manner of buildings: open door, say ‘kia ora’, pump hand sanitiser bottle, scan the QR code. Scanning the QR code was a mystical, blotchy, magical rite of entry. While for some it was a means of tracing presences and transmission points over time, the QR code also became a locus of antagonism against vaccine mandates. Not everyone valued these posters in the same way. But it is important to remember that one way to acknowledge the power of icons is through iconoclasm—by wanting to destroy them. A deep hostility to QR codes was another way of investing them with sacred power.

As with QR codes, masks, my fifth icon, have also been profoundly contested. Iconodules (image lovers) and iconoclasts (image destroyers) alike have invested the mask with potent sacred capacities. For some, it indicated a reprehensible cowardice, and its use was synonymous with slavish obedience to state authority. While for others, it operated as an invaluable shield which protected oneself against disease and death. But more than that, the mask could be endowed with soteriological capability: by wearing masks we saved our own lives and the lives of those we love. The mask was a visible outer sign of medical salvation.

The Rapid Antigen Test or RAT is the final icon I want to address. After poking uncomfortable sticks up our nasal orifices, we then dipped the stick in a translucent liquid and shook it around. With much care, we then gently, and with trepidation, dripped just a few drops of the liquid onto an elongated stick. We then played the waiting game; hoping, praying, for just one line to emerge. The RAT is an icon that speaks back to you. It measures your worth and it dictates your future. It offers waves of profound relief or it sends you into the pits of despair. Of all the icons that I have discussed, few are as powerful as the RAT.

These new pandemic-era objects and rituals can be regarded as ‘iconic’ in

that they invoke faith, health, salvation, and intense emotionality through material forms. They dispelled anxiety by instantiating the invisible within the material. It was precisely because of this dynamic that many of these icons also inspired a vociferous counter-politics. Rejecting masks and QR codes, for example, were iconoclastic attempts to delegitimise and disempower these powerful materialisations of state authority. Recognising the power of icons allows us to understand something of the devotion, anxiety, and repulsion that such objects have evoked.

Conclusion

In this article I have traced some of the contours of the sacred within the discourses, rituals, and materialities of Covid governance in New Zealand. Through ideas of solidity, sacrifice, sovereignty, and the iconic, I see a political theological analysis as providing valuable ways to reconsider sacred aspects of our modern techno-politics. Political theology is often used by scholars as a critical approach to expose and negate religious dynamics operating within secular government. Much political theology is written as a project of demythologisation. The ‘idol’ of the state needs to be torn down; its sacred core should be smashed. Political theology is therefore often used as a tool of the ever-reforming purification logics of Protestant and secular iconoclasm.

Against this approach, I have been more ambivalent about what to do with the sacred within our Covid politics. My inclination has not been to tear it down. As someone who comes from within the Christian tradition, and who admires and appreciates a sacramental imagination, the presence of the sacred is not a problem for me *per se*. In fact, its absence would seem to me to be much more terrifying. My appreciation for the sacred within Covid governance is not, therefore, driven out of an iconoclastic critique, even if I remain decidedly wary of the operations of state power.

I hold that, during times of crisis, it is advantageous to have a strong interventionist state. This is because I believe that the primary moral responsibility of the state is to care and protect the vulnerable. In fact, I

regard this as a sacred task. Because Māori checkpoints sought to protect the vulnerable, including especially the elderly, I both applaud and support this exercise of rangatiratanga. The self-sacrifice of those who worked hard to keep others safe remains, in my mind, beautiful and admirable. Solidarity has never been complete; and exclusions must be acknowledged and addressed. But there was also something vital about the aspiration to be ‘a team of five million’. A political theology of Covid governance provides useful analytical tools to understand social and political processes, even in secular contexts such as New Zealand. While it does not avert the necessity of careful moral evaluation of decisions and measures, it may help us understand better why governance of the pandemic was so challenging.