Carl Schmitt, Political Theology, and Eschatology

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Abstract

"Political Theology" is the rubric under which Carl Schmitt constructed his critique of liberalism and modern political culture. This critique remains influential even given the taint attached to Schmitt's name by his Nazi involvement. Schmitt's presupposition was that political concepts are secularized theological concepts, and his "political theology of the mortal god" was an attempt to formulate a political theological reason that could think through the paradox of sovereignty. This attempt founders on his inadequate understanding of the theological concept of time as eschatological. Reflecting on his failure provides a way to think anew about time as well as politics.

Keywords

political theology, Carl Schmitt, eschatology, apocalyptic literature

"Political theology" is a phrase appearing in a wide variety of contexts today, from critically relating religion and politics to responding to perceived failures of political discourse and aporias of modern reason. But, as the contemporary German political theologian Johann Baptist Metz points out, "'Political theology' can mean several things and is therefore ambiguous. It also suffers from historical implications."[1] Chief among these "historical implications" from which "political theology" "suffers" (especially in Germany) is the work of Carl Schmitt, a twentieth century legal theorist who set himself up to become the "crown jurist of the Third Reich." Schmitt developed his political theology as a response to the constitutional crises of the Weimar Republic. He favored a strong interpretation of the emergency powers of the president (Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution) as a way to deal with the political chaos that plagued

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[1] Johann Baptist Metz, "The Church's Social Function in the Light of a 'Political Theology,'" *Love's Strategy: The Political Theology of Johann Baptist Metz*, ed. John K. Downey (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1999), 26.

1920s Germany. Eventually despairing of the ability of liberal parliaments to make the decisions needed for political survival, Schmitt joined the Nazi Party in 1933 and tried to reform Nazi Germany's legal theory from within (although his influence in Nazi reforms waned after a conflict with the SS in 1936). After the war, Schmitt was interned at Nuremberg for more than a year under examination as a possible war criminal. He was released but banned from resuming a university career. Nevertheless, he exercised considerable influence as a private scholar until his death in 1985.[2]

Schmitt was very clear he was not a theologian, and he resisted the intrusion of theologians in politics. Nevertheless, reading Schmitt requires taking seriously his claim that, "All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts."[3] This is more than a historical claim, and the notion of "secularized theology" must be kept in mind in the consideration of modern political concepts despite the modern understanding of "secular" as being liberated from religion (and even opposed to any religious world view). For Schmitt, the matter was not whether one was hostile or supportive of religion but uncovering the structural parallels between theological and political concepts. Schmitt encouraged the view that he was a twentieth century Thomas Hobbes offering a secularized, rational, political theology of what Hobbes described as the "mortal god" Leviathan analogous to the theology of the immortal God of Christianity (specifically Roman Catholicism in Schmitt's case[4]). Both developed their political theologies in the contexts of

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[2] In the transcript of the interviews at Nuremberg, Schmitt comes across as a German Mandarin professor dealing in abstract concepts who "felt superior" to Hitler intellectually; he admits to being "ashamed" of introducing anti-Semitic comments into his writing during the 1930s, but he concludes, "I do not consider it appropriate to continue to rummage around in the disgrace we suffered at that time." – Joseph Bendersky, "Carl Schmitt at Nuremberg," *Telos* 72 (Summer 1987): 97-101. Schmitt later claimed to have been a "Christian Epimetheus," the "one who reflects after the fact" but who was as helpless to undo Nazi atrocities as was Epimetheus to undo Pandora's act – Carl Schmitt, *Ex Captivitate Salus: Erfahrungen der Zeit 1945-47* (Cologne: Greven, 1950), 12; see also Konrad Weiss, *Der christliche Epimetheus* (Edwin Runge, 1933), 81. Schmitt also portrayed himself as Benito Cereno, the sea captain of the eponymous novel by Hermann Melville, whose cargo of slaves take over the ship and force him to masquerade at being in command until he escapes. Unlike Cereno, Schmitt never jumped sip.

[3] Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: M. I. T. Press, 1985; first German edition 1922; rev. 1934), 36. Another of Schmitt's works also has "political theology" in its title: *Politische Theologie II: Die Legende von der Erledigung jeder politischen Theologie*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Duncker and Humblot, 1984).

[4] Despite formal problems in his relationship to the Roman Catholic Church, Schmitt claimed, "Ich bin Katholik nicht nur dem Bekenntnis, sondern auch der geschichtlichen Herkunft, wenn ich so sagen darf, der Rasse nach." *Glossarium: Aufzeichnungen der Jahre 1947-1951*, ed. Eberhard Freiherr von Medem (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1991), 131.

crises – the English Civil War and the Weimar Republic, respectively – that necessitated finding a basis for political order and security. This also helps account for the current interest in Schmitt's work despite his odious political associations: Schmitt defined his crisis as the failure of liberal parliamentarism, and Schmitt's political theology critiques a liberalism that continues to resonate in an ostensibly post-liberal age.

This essay will examine Schmitt's political theology with a particular focus on the politically relevant theological conception of time as eschatological in Judaism and Christianity. Eschatology (beliefs, hopes, and expectations regarding the end-times) has its Jewish and Christian roots in apocalyptic texts, that is, literature formally based on a revelation (apocalypse) from God to the (usually pseudonymous) author about the eschaton (time's end or rupture). This largely extra-canonical literature flourished in the period roughly from 200 BCE until 200 CE, starting with the Book of Daniel in the Hebrew Scriptures until about 100 years after the writing of the Revelation to John in the New Testament. Eschatology has an essentially political character in this literature as the hoped for end/eschaton of the (evil) age is marked by the advent of God's reign and justice. Apocalyptic literature flourishes in crisis: it is produced by and for people who are suffering because of their faith and is written to offer encouragement and hope. Believers are suffering not through their own fault (pace the prophets) but because evil is at work. The apocalyptic author unfolds, following God's revelation, a plan according to which the current darkness will soon be pierced by the light of God's justice. The task of believers is to keep the faith, enduring suffering, persecution, even martyrdom confident in the fast approaching victory of God over chaos and the renewal of God's creation.

From its beginning this literature has presented problems for understanding (even apart from its use of symbolically-rich language). At a basic level, there is the problem that despite the promise, God's reign has not arrived. For example, eschatological preaching of the advent of God's reign is central to the Christian gospel. This hope is based on the resurrection of Jesus to life which is not only the central myth of Christianity but the guarantee that the end is at hand – resurrection of those who die in the final era is an idea first introduced in the apocalyptic Book of Daniel (chapter 12) as a way to deal with the problem of martyrdom for an audience that did not expect personal immortality. Resurrection is a sign of the eschaton; Jesus has been resurrected (the "first fruit" of the eschatological harvest); therefore, the end is at hand and Jesus will return as the Risen Lord/Son of Man/Apocalyptic Judge soon (the parousia). Paul, for example, thought this would happen while he was still alive (see 1 Thessalonians 4-5, where Paul writes for example in 4:17 [NRSV],

"Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air."). And yet already in the New Testament attempts are being made to deal with the delay of the return as can be seen in comparing the apocalyptic discourses in the synoptic gospels. Where Mark 13 expects the parousia will arrive very soon, the parallel passage in Matthew 24-25 adds a series of parables encouraging preparedness while waiting for a parousia that will come some day and Luke 21 de-emphasizes the immediacy of the return and describes God's plans for the interim.

More significantly, the difficulty in understanding apocalyptic literature on the eschaton is attached to the dualistic worldview of this literature. The ethical dualism of the apocalyptic split between light (good) and darkness (evil) usually presents no problem: believers are used to thinking about life as a battleground between good and evil in which they are trying to be on the right (winning?) side (or at least there is no problem with ethical dualism until believers try to take their monotheism seriously – see the Book of Job where Satan is a heavenly accuser and not the Prince of Darkness, and where Job's challenge is directly to God as in Job 31:35 [NRSV], "Oh, that I had one to hear me! Here is my signature! let the Almighty answer me!"). It is more the ontological dualism lurking in this literature, a dualism that divides heaven from earth as separate realities, that gives rise to problems especially in light of the seeming frustration of eschatological hopes. Distinctions between this age and the next, that is, between temporal "worlds" get read in terms of ontologically separate levels of reality, heaven and earth. Under Greek influence it is easy to believe this world is passing away because it is not real. The eschaton can then be read in a new way, not in terms of the delayed advent of God's political reign, but as privatized as my personal end, my escape from this (unreal) world into the world to come, my immortality understood in terms of that which is most "real" about me, that is, my soul (and not my resurrected body). Once the solution becomes focused on the individual soul, the problem of understanding the apocalyptic promise has been "solved," at the cost of the loss of the political core of eschatological hope. This is especially a problem for Christianity given its confusion regarding time, history, and eschatology. The basis for Christians' future hope (the eschaton) is a past event (the resurrection): which way do they face? It has proved easier to avoid the question and for Christian thinking to escape from history altogether by privatizing hope in terms of the individual's eschaton (death) as the point of departure from a temporal world to an eternal heaven. Politically oriented hope is left behind.

Ironically, attempting to preserve the political spirit of eschatological hope may also lead to the deformation of eschatology. Apocalyptic sects often have

been dangerous in their willingness to disrupt a political status quo that has been unveiled to them as evil. Every age seems to be capable of producing its Thomas Müntzer to lead a Peasant War. The modern response to this danger has been to tame eschatology by secularizing it. On the one hand, this means dealing with eschatology the way religion in general is dealt with in modernity, that is, by taking it out of the public realm as politically dangerous and privatizing it as a matter of individual conscience. Religion is reduced to a matter of private faith rather than public truth, and eschatology is about the fate of the individual soul. At the same time, the eschaton is turned into a telos (goal rather than rupture) and eschatology is turned into philosophy of history, thus making it more abstract at the same moment as secularizing it. Karl Löwith, for example, claims the modern understanding of history has roots in Jewish and Christian eschatology: "the philosophy of history originates with the Hebrew and Christian faith in a fulfillment and . . . ends with the secularization of its eschatological pattern," so that "moderns elaborate a philosophy of history by secularizing theological principles and applying them to an ever increasing number of empirical facts."[5] This empiricism eventually leads to dropping the philosophical search for meaning in history and subjecting history (and political action as historical) to technological planning processes that admit no interruptions. Politics is turned into administration in the bureaucratization process described by Max Weber.

This is the kind of thinking Schmitt rejected as failing to provide a way to address the constitutional crises and other political issues he faced. Schmitt turned to political theology as a way to think outside modern political culture. *Political Theology*, for example, was written to counter the legal positivism of Hans Kelsen and others who would reduce politics to norms and rules.[6] Positivism depends on law to establish political legitimacy and is, therefore, incapable of addressing those emergencies that call for sovereign power to be exercised outside the law, and yet it is this power that constitutes the legal order itself: positivism cannot think about the ground of its own rationality. Schmitt's political theology responded to this paradox by "secularizing" theological concepts and thinking: again, "All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts."[7]

When it came to eschatology, however, Schmitt faced problems he could not solve. He thought as a jurist, not a theologian, and had no interest in

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[5] Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), 2. 19.

[6] Schmitt, *Political Theology*, chapter 2; see also, Carl Schmitt, *Legality and Legitimacy*, trans. Jeffrey Seitzer (Durham, North Carolina/London: Duke University Press, 2004; fist German edition 1932).

[7] Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36.

grounding politics in the natural law tradition of Roman Catholic theology. Instead eschatology provided impetus to the decisionism Schmitt saw as foundational to political order. Crises put one outside normal situations and call for (sovereign) decisions whether the crisis be political or eschatological. But Schmitt understood the difficulty in secularizing eschatology: the world he was addressing not only resisted any push into metaphysics, it was characterized by faith as sinful. The only hope left for eschatology was to provide a restraining force on the powers of darkness, and Schmitt turned to the deutero-Pauline concept of the *katechon*, the restrainer, to provide the order the world required. The result is the kind of dualism referred to above in which eschatology becomes atemporal and time itself the kind of "background to reality" described by J. T. Fraser. Lost is the opportunity provided by eschatology for developing a more adequate political ontology and what Fraser labels "sociotemporality," the "level-specific temporality of a society."[8]

The Crisis of (Weimar) Liberalism

A good way to understand a theory is to ask what problem it intends to solve. In Schmitt's case, this is relatively clear: his political theology aims at dealing with the exceptional political situation. "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception," the blunt original opening statement of *Political Theology*, locates the essence of sovereignty in the power to make an effective decision outside normal politics and its rules. "The exception is more interesting than the rule. The rule proves nothing; the exception proves everything."[9] Normativism as a legal theory runs up against the exception: because the exception is by definition outside the norm, normativism cannot account for it. "Unlike the normal situation, when the autonomous moment of decision recedes to a minimum, the norm is destroyed in the exception."[10] Yet a decision must be made if the sovereign entity is to endure.

Schmitt developed his exceptional notion of sovereignty in the concrete context of the parliamentary paralysis that obtained for periods of the Weimar Republic. He was very active in the debates surrounding the proper interpretation of Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution, the article that defined the emergency powers of the president. Some legal theorists read Article 48 as limiting the emergency powers of the president to suspend only those parts of

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[8] J. T. Fraser, *Time, Conflict, and Human Values* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 37.
[9] Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 15.
[10] Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 12.

the constitution identified in the article. Schmitt, on the contrary, interpreted Article 48 broadly and as locating sovereign power in the president who had the power to decide when an exceptional situation existed, how to deal with it, and when it was over. "Article 48 grants unlimited power" and "the most guidance the constitution can provide is to indicate who can act in [this] case."[11] Parliamentary paralysis must not be allowed to lead to political chaos; order must be secured.

Too often Schmitt is read as celebrating or glorifying the exception and the need for a decision. His decisionism is seen as foundationally irrational. Exceptions destroy norms, according to Schmitt, and allow for the free exercise of sovereign will rather than normative reason. Jürgen Habermas, for example, acknowledges that Schmitt was, "a good writer who could combine conceptual precision with surprising and ingenious associations of ideas," but fears that Schmitt's work results in "the violent destruction of the normative as such," so that Schmitt reduces politics to aesthetics and thereby makes political discourse irrational.[12] This reading misses the heart of Schmitt's struggle, however, which is to think through the exception in a manner that allows for the maintaining of rational order. Exceptions are a given of concrete political life. The challenge is how to deal with them in a rationally justifiable manner. After claiming "the norm is destroyed in the exception," Schmitt continues, "The exception remains, nevertheless, accessible to jurisprudence because both elements, the norm as well as the decision, remain within the framework of the juristic."[13] The decision on exceptional situations may be outside norms, but this is irrational only if reason is limited to a normative activity. Schmitt was trying to find a way to reason beyond norms, to deal with what Giorgio Agamben has described as the "paradox of sovereignty": sovereign power determines the normal situation but can do this only extra-normally.[14] Norms

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[11] Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 11, 7. See: Ellen Kennedy, *Constitutional Failure: Carl Schmitt in Weimar* (Durham, North Carolina and London: Duke University Press, 2004).

[12] Jürgen Habermas, "The Horrors of Autonomy: Carl Schmitt in English," *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians Debate*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M. I. T. Press, 1989), 133, 137. See also: Habermas, "Carl Schmitt and the Political Intellectual History of the Federal Republic," *A Berlin Republic: Writings on Germany*, trans. Steve Randall (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 107-117; Richard Wolin, "Carl Schmitt, Political Existentialism, and the Total State," *The Terms of Cultural Criticism: The Frankfurt School, Existentialism, Poststructuralism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 83-104; and Wolin, "Carl Schmitt: The Conservative Revolution and the Aesthetics of Horror," *Labyrinths: Explorations in the Critical History of Ideas* (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 103-122.

[13] Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 12.

[14] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 15-29.

do not encompass exceptions by definition, so that attempts to reduce exceptions to norms must fail, and the root of the crisis of political reason is not thinking about the exception but trying to reduce politics to a purely normative activity.

Schmitt's interpretation of Article 48 reflects the pervasive anti-liberalism of his work. "Liberalism" here is the political guise of the Enlightenment and derives from Kant's definition of Enlightenment as having the courage to use one's own reason publicly without direction from another. Liberal politics is framed in terms of the rights and duties of autonomous individuals, the state in terms of contractual agreements among these individuals, and political legitimacy in terms of legality. Schmitt rejected all of this. For Schmitt, the Weimar experience simply illustrated his belief that the "liberal constitutional state . . . attempts to repress the question of sovereignty by a division and mutual control of competencies."[15] Even more basic than this division of powers, liberal politics is based on parliamentary discussion, but as the Weimar experience displayed, this discussion could devolve from "an exchange of opinion that is governed by the purpose of persuading one's opponent through argument of the truth or justice of something or allowing oneself to be persuaded" to a state where "it is no longer a question of persuading one's opponent . . . but rather of winning a majority to govern with." The result: "modern mass democracy has made argumentative public discussion an empty formality."[16] Schmitt inherits from Donoso Cortés the suspicion that "continuous discussion [is] a method of circumventing responsibility and of ascribing to freedom of speech and of the press an excessive importance that in the final analysis permits the decision to be evaded." In biblical terms, "Liberalism . . . existed for Donoso Cortés only in that short interim period in which it was possible to answer the question 'Christ or Barabbas?' with a proposal to adjourn or to appoint a commission of investigation."[17]

Schmitt's objections to liberalism reflect theoretical concerns and political convictions that appear throughout his writings and are not confined to Weimar crises. For example, Schmitt was convinced that liberal individualism entails pluralism, and pluralism undermines politics and potentially destroys the state. The liberal starting point for the analysis of social and political con-

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[15] Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 11. For more on Schmitt's anti-liberalism, see: John P. McCormick, *Carl Schmitt's Critique of Liberalism: Against Politics as Technology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and David Dyzenhaus, ed., *Law as Politics: Carl Schmitt's Critique of Liberalism* (Durham, North Carolina and London: Duke University Press, 1998).

[16] Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. Ellen Kennedy (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M. I. T. Press, 1985), 5-7.

[17] Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 62-63.

ditions is the individual, and the individual in liberal society is free to belong to any number of social entities ranging from religious groups to sports associations to labor unions to political parties. This social pluralism reduces politics to one sphere of human social activity among others and makes politics "a revocable service for individuals and their free associations."[18] Pluralist politics is not politics at all, because for Schmitt politics is central to human self-understanding, not an optional activity alongside others. Schmitt also was concerned about the reduction of politics to economics. Schmitt accepted Max Weber's analysis of how modern liberal culture came to be dominated by economic and technological planning processes, but he differed from Weber in his evaluation of this change. Turning from politics to economics does not represent an increase in the rationality of human communal life but is the absolute loss of the good (the goal of politics since the Greeks) under the "tyranny of [economic] values."[19] Finally, at the level of international relations, Schmitt was critical of liberalism's language of universal human rights from the time of his opposition to the League of Nations through his post-World War II writings. Talk of human rights merely masks the imperialism springing from the denial of human difference. In the end, there is no "political principle" or "intellectually consistent idea" in liberalism.[20] That is, liberalism offers no way to think through political crises. This realization drives Schmitt to the fundamental question of the meaning of "political."

Friend/Enemy

Schmitt is adamant that "The concept of the state presupposes the concept of the political," and offers his own political principle in terms of a primary distinction: "The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy."[21] Schmitt arrives at this definition of the political by situating politics alongside other forms of human activity, all of which depend on a fundamental distinction: beautiful/ugly in art, good/evil in morality, profitable/unprofitable in economics. The political distinction is the existentially final distinction, however, because the

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[18] Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1996; German original 1932), 45.

[19] See Carl Schmitt, "Die Tyrannei der Werte," in Carl Schmitt, Eberhard Jüngel, Sepp Schelz, *Die Tyrannei der Werte* (Hamburg: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1979).

[20] Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 70.

[21] Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 19, 26. Schmitt maintains the classical distinction between *hostis* and *inimicus*, that is, between the public enemy and the private foe. Politics is about the former, not the latter.

conflict between friend and enemy can become the extreme conflict, that is, war, where life itself is at stake. Attempts to avoid the fundamental conflict are attempts to avoid politics, because the possibility of existential (life or death) conflict is essential to politics.

Schmitt's language here is eschatological, and he easily can be misinterpreted as glorifying conflict and war. The last chapter of *Political Theology*, "On the Counterrevolutionary Philosophy of the State (de Maistre, Bonald, Donoso Cortés)," is full of apocalyptic language: "good and evil, God and the devil"; the "decisive battle" of the "last battle"; how Donoso Cortés is able to "anticipate the Last Judgment." So Heinrich Meier concludes, "The inescapability of the distinction between friend and enemy in the political 'sphere' 'corresponds' to the inevitability of the decision between God and Satan in the theological 'sphere.'"[22] But Schmitt's friend/enemy distinction is misread when placed in the context of this eschatological ethical dualism. Schmitt does not demonize the enemy as representative of the eschatological forces of darkness and evil. He is quite clear that, "The political enemy need not be morally evil."[23] Schmitt's intent is to be "realistic" (in the sense of the political realism of those inspired by Schmitt like Hans Morgenthau): hostility is a real force in political life that must be faced if the decisions necessary to the maintenance of order are to be made. Demonizing the enemy obfuscates political conditions. Schmitt's political theology secularizes eschatology differently.

Political Theology and Representation

Properly understanding the role of eschatology in Schmitt's thinking requires a more careful examination of Schmitt's political theology in general. Schmitt resented the intrusion of theologians in politics and considered himself not a true theologian but at most a "theologian of jurisprudence."[24] And yet Schmitt realized that spelling out a rational response to the exceptions that both called for and defined sovereignty required a political theology. Schmitt defined sovereignty in terms of making decisions in exceptional situations: how was it possible to view this decision as anything other than an arbitrary act of will on the part of the sovereign? The exception is outside legal norms, and it is these norms that supposedly guide the rationality of the legal system. For Schmitt,

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[22] Heinrich Meier, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue*, trans. J. Harvey Lomax (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 55.

[23] Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 27.

[24] See for example, Carl Schmitt, *Glossarium*, 23 ("ich bin ein Theologe der Jurisprudenz"), and 281 ("Silete theologi extra ecclesiam!").

however, "the norm as well as the decision, remain within the framework of the juristic," as we have seen above. Schmitt's political theology explains how this is possible by attempting to locate a rational principle in the sovereign decision.

The starting point for Schmitt's political theology is the correspondence he sets up between "concepts of the modern theory of the state" and "secularized theological concepts." The quote cited above, "All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts," continues, "not only because of their historical development – in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver – but also because of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts. The exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology."[25]

Again, this is not an endorsement of secularization as that term has come to be understood in late modernity. As explained above, Schmitt rejected legal positivism precisely as a secular theory of the state: positivism's confidence in a closed and ostensibly self-grounding system of rules and norms proved unable to deal rationally with the exception. Jacob Taubes correctly claims, "Secularization is thus not a positive concept for Schmitt. On the contrary, to him it is the devil. His objection is: The law of the state doesn't understand itself." This is the case because the law of the state "operates with concepts whose ground, whose root, remains concealed from it.... And this is why castles are built that on the day of the true emergency collapse into nothing." Schmitt, unlike Hans Kelsen and other legal positivists, "insists that theology is always in the right as opposed to these nebbich state law theorists, because there the concepts have meaning and coherence, whereas in the law of the state they are confused."[26] The task is to think through theology as a jurist.

Schmitt marks the correspondence between theology and political concepts in order to open up the "systematic structure" of each. He turns specifically to Roman Catholic theology for a way of thinking as well as for useful concepts. "Reason" is the issue – thinking rationally about the exception; and what Roman Catholic theology provides Schmitt is not an irrational faith but a paradigm of reason radically different from modern, rule-governed rationalism and able to deal with the exception in a rational manner. Renato Cristi points out that for Schmitt, "The Church was not the seat of irrationalism but

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[25] Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36.
[26] Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, trans. Dana Hollander (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004; German original 1993), 66, 64, 67.

embodied a form of rationality, akin to juridical thinking, that was foreign to the culture that issued from the Enlightenment."[27]

In *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, the companion volume to *Political Theology*, Schmitt claims, "The Church has its own rationality."[28] Positivism and economic/technological rationality are about control, a control achieved by reductionism: "first they construct a contrast between two spheres, and then they dissolve this contrast into nothing by reducing one to the other."[29] The Church, by contrast, is a *complexio oppositorum*, a complex of opposites able to hold opposing ideas in thought without reducing one to the other (or sublating them in some higher third). That the Church is able to do so rationally is evident in the fact that it can make and justify decisions in the muddle of confused and contradicting opinions, embracing rather than negating or sublating these oppositions. Theologically, "the Old and New Testament [sic] alike are scriptural canon; the Marcionite either-or is answered with an as-well-as." Politically, the Catholic Church is "an autocratic monarchy whose head is elected by the aristocracy of cardinals but in which there is nevertheless so much democracy that, Dupanloup put it, even the least shepherd of Abruzzi, regardless of his birth and station, has the possibility to become this autocratic sovereign" and a community able to embrace at one and the same time "a rigorous philosopher of authoritarian dictatorship, like the Spanish diplomat Donoso Cortés, and a 'good Samaritan' of the poor with syndicalist connections, like the Irish rebel Padraic Pearse."[30] Translating this from the theological to the political, the exception may be outside legal rules, but rational decisions can still be made in exceptional situations as there is no place outside the complex of politics (as there is no place outside the theological *complexio*).

Schmitt locates the rationality of Church decisionism in what he calls the "principle of representation" (and his political theology might be understood as "the secularization of the principle of representation").[31] The Church repre-

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[27] Renato Cristi, *Carl Schmitt and Authoritarian Liberalism* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998), 75. Heinrich Meier reaches the opposite conclusion: in comparison with the political philosophy of Leo Strauss, Schmitt's political theology demands a "leap of faith" that is not rational – *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue*. In Schmitt's own day, Hugo Ball characterized Schmitt's thinking as "übervernünftig" rather than "unvernünftig" – Hugo Ball, "Carl Schmitts Politische Theologie," *Hochland* 21 (1924): 263-286.

[28] Carl Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, trans. G. L. Ulmen (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996), 13. See, also: Francis Slade, "Catholicism as a Paradigm of the Political?" *Telos* 109 (1996): 113-122.

[29] Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 43.

[30] Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, 7.

[31] Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, 8; Duncan Kelly, "Carl Schmitt's Political Theory of Representation," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 65/1 (January 2004): 121.

sents God become incarnate in Jesus Christ and is able to make decisions based on the authority of the representatives of this divine ground. The pope, for example, is the Vicar of Christ, the personal representative of the immortal God. It is this representative character that is the source of the pope's authority. The same could be said derivatively of the priest. This authority does not depend on the "personality" of the pope or priest: they embody the authority of God in their persons and are no mere deputies. As representatives, pope and priest occupy places in a hierarchical authority in the Church, and because in them the authority of God is represented, their authority is rational, that is, it demands obedience from rational people.

Explicating the kinship between theology and jurisprudence is a matter of the "sociological consideration of these concepts" or what Schmitt spells out more fully as the sociology of concepts. The sociology of concepts is concerned with the deep structures of a particular cultural era, the parallels among the elements of a particular culture. Schmitt's specific concerns were Roman Catholic theology and jurisprudence, but the task is not to apply Roman Catholic solutions to jurisprudential problems. It is rather to give political form to the metaphysical principle of representation, or, more precisely, to think through jurisprudence to find its own metaphysical presuppositions, presuppositions that are as necessary to rational jurisprudence as they are to theology: "The presupposition of this kind of sociology of juristic concepts is thus a radical conceptualization, a consistent thinking that is pushed into metaphysics and theology."[32]

This is what it means to be a "theologian of jurisprudence."

A Political Theology of the Mortal God

Schmitt had a model for this work in Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes was not a Roman Catholic, but his *Leviathan* was an attempt to do what Schmitt was trying to do: to think through a chaotic political situation by framing a secularized political theology in order to understand the origin of the state and its principle of order. Schmitt was not so much interested in the social contract as Hobbes' mechanism for moving from the state of nature to the Commonwealth as he was in the nature and result of that transition. Schmitt summarizes Hobbes: "The terror of the state of nature drives anguished individuals to come together; their fear rises to an extreme; a spark of reason (*ratio*) flashes, and suddenly there stands in front of them a new god."[33] Hobbes named this

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[32] Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 46.
[33] Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes,* trans George Schwab

new god Leviathan, "that *Mortall God*, to which wee owe under the *Immortal God*, our peace and defence."[34] Hobbes worked through politics using the myth of the leviathan (Job 41) and the theology that went with it to frame what might be called a "political theology of the mortal god" of the sovereign. Schmitt saw as his own task a similar construction of a political theology of the mortal god in the twentieth century.

Schmitt was aware, however, that Hobbes had failed in his project, as the subtitle of Schmitt's work on Hobbes indicates (*The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes: Meaning and Failure of a Political Symbol*). Hobbes's political theology of the mortal god was undermined by liberalism with its reduction of politics to service of the individual and positivist hostility to metaphysics. When conscience is prized over faith in politics, political theology is moribund, and this is a dangerous situation: "No political system can survive even a generation with only naked techniques of holding power. To the political belongs the idea, because there is no politics without authority and no authority without an ethos of belief."[35] But Schmitt knew he lived in an age in which, "Conceptions of transcendence will no longer be credible to most educated people, who will settle for either a more or less clear immanence-pantheism or a positivist indifference to any metaphysics."[36] How can one do political theology according to the sociology of concepts when there is no push towards transcendence in the culture? This was the dilemma for Donoso-Cortés already in the nineteenth century. Donoso-Cortés was a "Catholic philosopher of the state, one who was intensely conscious of the metaphysical kernel of all politics" even when this was denied in legal positivism. The result of this denial was liberal pluralism's paralysis of politics. In the end, "For him there was thus only one solution: dictatorship. It is the solution that Hobbes also reached by the same kind of decisionist thinking."[37] Dictatorship was Schmitt's solution to the chaos of Weimar liberal parliamentarism as well.

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and Erna Hilfstein (Westport, Connecticut/London: Greenwood Press, 1996; first German edition 1938), 31.

[34] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 120.

[35] Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, 17. The catalyst for Hobbes' failure was the miracle: Hobbes recognized the necessity of miracles as signs of the power of the leviathan, but as an empirical scientist and early modern biblical critic, Hobbes allowed for private reserve regarding belief in miracles. This opened up what later became the rift between public and private in liberalism – Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, chapter 5.

[36] Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 50.

[37] Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 51, 52.

The *Katechon*

Schmitt's political despair was more than a function of concrete political conditions; it reflects a pessimism regarding this world that also was part of his political theology. Schmitt admits to a "pessimistic anthropology" and claims "all genuine political theories presuppose man to be evil."[38] Expressed theologically, Schmitt's anthropology is marked by original sin. Heinrich Meier goes so far as to claim, "Original sin is the central point around which everything turns in [Schmitt's] anthropological confession of faith."[39] The political realism of Schmitt's grounding politics on the friend/enemy distinction can be read as the secularization of this theological concept.

The despair of this world – given concrete conditions, the difficulties for a theory of representation, and the conviction of original sin – brings the eschatological character of Schmitt's political theology to the fore. How is order to be (rationally) maintained in the midst of chaos? Schmitt embraces of the concept of the *katechon* for this purpose. The *katechon* or "restrainer" makes its appearance in the New Testament deutero-Pauline epistle 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12: "And you know what is now restraining him [the lawless one], so that he may be revealed when his time comes. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work, but only until the one who now restrains it is removed." (2:6-7, NRSV) It functions in a program for putting the brakes on what the author sees as excessive eschatological enthusiasm among Thessalonian Christians. It should be remembered that early Christian preaching announced the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth as the first fruit of the eschatological harvest, that is, the sign and inauguration of the resurrections of the (recently) dead that were to occur on the Day of Judgment at the end of this evil age. And it seems as if at least some Christians took seriously the hope proclaimed by Jesus in the Gospel of Mark 9:1, "Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power." This enthusiasm for the eschaton was tempered in part by the delay of the return (parousia) of the Messiah, but it seems to have flared up at moments of stress in various early Christian communities. An outbreak of such enthusiasm, an enthusiasm that threatened public order at Thessalonika, led the author of 2 Thessalonians to aver that Christ will return at some point in the future to overturn the current evil world order and institute the reign of God,

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[38] Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 61. See also: Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 54-57.

[39] Meier, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss*, 57. See also: Johann Baptist Metz, "Monotheism and Democracy: Religion and Politics on Modernity's Ground," *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, ed. and trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York/Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1998), 146.

but the time for that intervention is not yet and Christians should not expect the return too soon. In the interim God is making use of a historical agent to "restrain" the forces of darkness represented by the "lawless one" that threaten to overwhelm believers. (This tempering of the eschatological spirit is part of the evidence for questioning Pauline authorship of this epistle – the eschatology here is very different from that evident in the undisputed letters of Paul.) We live in an age of apocalyptic conflict between good and evil, between light and darkness, in which we hope for a heavenly kingdom while living in a temporal reality given over to the forces of Satan. God contained chaos in creation, but that chaos is breaking forth again, and we look for order. The *katechon* is appointed by God to restrain the forces of chaos at work in the world and provide the political stability we need and should support in order to survive until the end.

There is some confusion regarding exactly when Schmitt began to employ the word *katechon* in his writing and therefore what was the originating context for its use.[40] But there is no dispute about the importance of the "restrainer" which Schmitt makes absolutely clear is central to his thinking: "I cannot believe that for an originally Christian belief any other image of history than the *Kat-echon* is possible"; and, "I believe in the Katechon; for me as a Christian, it is the only possible way to understand and find history meaningful."[41] There always is someone or some power working as the restrainer in history, although it is not always possible to identify who or what this is.[42] Still, this restraint on chaos is the most that can be hoped for in history and politics. The eschatology that served to contextualize the decision that lies at the heart of political order for Schmitt in the end is reduced to a principle for maintaining that order at all costs. Politics is about being realistic, that is, recognizing and restraining the forces of chaos that ever threaten to overwhelm political existence.

But what has happened to eschatology here? A way of understanding time that is politically radical has once again been tamed in a process of secularization. Although Schmitt rejects the modern hostility towards religion, he still thinks like a jurist and not a theologian (or philosopher). Jacob Taubes points out:

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[40] See: Heinrich Meier, *The Lesson of Carl Schmitt: Four Chapters on the Distinction between Political Theology and Political Philosophy*, trans. Marcus Brainard (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 161 n. 106; Raphael Gross, *Carl Schmitt und die Juden: Eine deutsche Rechtslehre* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2000), chapter IV; Felix Blindow, *Carl Schmitts Reichsordnung: Strategie für einen europäische Großraum* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1999), 144-165.

[41] Carl Schmit, *Der Nomos der Erde im Völkerrecht des Jus Publikum Europaeum* (Cologne: Greven, 1950), 29; and Schmit, *Glossarium*, 63. Author's translations.

[42] Schmit, *Der Nomos der Erde*, 28-32; *Politische Theologie II*, 81; *Glossarium*, 63, 165.

> It's one thing to be a theologian, a second thing to be a philosopher, and it's a third thing to be a jurist. That – I've learned in life – is a completely different way of understanding the world. The jurist has to legitimate the world as it is. This is part and parcel of the whole education, the whole idea of the office of he jurist.

In Schmitt's case this means:

> Schmitt's interest was in only one thing: that the party, that the chaos not rise to the top, that the state remain. No matter what the price. This is difficult for theologians and philosophers to follow, but as far as the jurist is concerned, as long as it is possible to find even one juridical form, by whatever hairsplitting ingenuity, this must absolutely be done, for otherwise chaos reigns. This is what he later calls the *katechon*.[43]

In the end, Schmitt lacks the courage of his political theological convictions. Theologically, Schmitt ends up close to Gnosticism in an ontological dualism between the fallen world of material creation and the opposed world of the spirit.[44] Conceptually, politics is secularized theology, but because Schmitt is unable to achieve this fully in his thinking, there is no positive meaning to political activity in this world. Philosophically, there is a performative contradiction in Schmitt's work. Schmitt developed his political theology as a criticism of legal positivism and its instrumental logic. Politics for Schmitt instead was existentially fundamental as the friend/enemy distinction could become life-threatening in the extreme case of war. But his concept of the restrainer reintroduces instrumentalism: politics is not substantive but a matter of doing whatever is necessary to maintain order.

In the context of distancing himself from contemporary culture, Schmitt claimed, "I lose my time and gain my space."[45] This is the typical Western movement gaining critical distance in spatial terms while pushing time into the background. Eschatology describes a very different critical move in which one does not escape from time but experiences the conflict that comes from being aware of living in different times at once. What apocalyptic literature unveils is the possibility of living in both this age and the "age to come" simultaneously, which in turn demands a critical engaging of the present that is political by definition, and that involves a critical distance based not on space but on time. J. T. Fraser contrasts "received views" which "tend to regard time

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[43] Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 103.

[44] See Jürgen Manemann, "'Beschleuniger wider Willen'? Zur Katechontik Carl Schmitts," *Jahrbuch Politische Theologie* 3 (1999):108-123.

[45] "ich verliere meine Zeit und gewinne meinen Raum." *Glossarium*, 16.

as a background to reality" – what Schmitt ultimately assumes, with Fraser's "hierarchical theory of time" that "regards time as constitutive of reality, as a symptom of or corollary to the complexity of the processes of integrative levels," a complexity which results in "time's conflicts."[46] This points the way towards a more adequate understanding of eschatology and of political theology than Schmitt's. Developing that understanding is the pressing task.

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[46] Fraser, *Time, Conflict, and Human Values*, 38-39.