Theology without God. Carl Schmitt's profane concept of the political

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Abstract:

Carl Schmitt describes his work as an instance of political theology, but this does not mean he is a theologian in the strict sense of the word. Many theological readings of Schmitt underestimate the deeply profane thrust of his basic concepts, such as sovereignty, the political, or decision. This paper argues that Schmitt's starting point is not a theological position, but the attempt to think 'the political' against other 'types of spirit'. In theology, he finds the closest analogy to political thinking. The logic of the concept of the political itself, however, remains deeply profane.

Key words: Carl Schmitt, the political, secularization, political theology

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Introduction

Many authors have tried to uncover the 'hidden core' of Carl Schmitt's work, situating it within theology (Meier 1995, 1998, De Wit 1992, Paléologue 2004, Wacker 1994, Meuter 1994), myth (Palaver 1998, McCormick 1999) or specific types of theology, such as Marcionism (Storme 2008). Especially the theological reading of Schmitt has been influential. Although Schmitt was excommunicated after his remarriage in 1925, he was well-known as a militant Catholic. Moreover, he often referred to Catholic counterrevolutionary thinkers such as Louis de Bonald, Joseph de Maistre or Donoso Cortés as sources of inspiration. He re-introduced the notions of 'political theology' and the 'katechon' within the 20th century debate.

However, Schmitt's relation to theology and religion is ambiguous. His politics may often have been of Catholic inspiration, but was his thinking of the political as such also so inspired? As Heinrich Mehring states, "[i]f Schmitt was really a believing theologian, we would no longer be interested in his work" (Mehring 2000, p. 1663). Indeed, in that case a philosopher would only read him from a historical point of view, or with the aim to better demarcate philosophy from theology (as Heinrich Meier sought to do), without learning anything from his thought as such.

In the following, I will question the so-called 'theological turn' Heinrich Meier introduced in his interpretation of Schmitt, showing that the logic of Schmitt's concept of the political has a very profane twist. After discussing Meier's reading, I will try to show the difference between Schmitt and the Catholic counterrevolutionaries. Stressing Schmitt's attempt to think the political, I will point to the specific function political theology has in his theorizing, and how it is at odds with the religious, premodern view of the Catholic

counterrevolutionaries. Schmitt's attempt to relativize enmity takes him to a position beyond secularization, warding off its negative side effects, instead of a presecular one. Finally, I will discuss the enigmatic concept of the katechon as a force of profanation.

The theological turn

The seminal work of Heinrich Meier, who masterfully depicted Schmitt as a deeply theological thinker, lays at the basis of the so-called 'theological turn' in Schmittian studies study of Schmitt (Meier 1995, 1998). Meier stated that a thinker's project cannot be fully understood unless its unifying core is disclosed. For Schmitt, he claims, this core is a belief in revelation. Meier's objective was not to explain Schmitt's thought in terms of his Catholic background, nor to reduce it to an application of theology, but to show how it is intrinsically grounded on faith in divine revelation. It would be crucial for Schmitt to obey God's command as it is revealed historically. The decision that follows upon this divine appeal constitutes an absolute moral decision that implies action instead of contemplation. Politics then becomes a struggle against the absolute (fundamentally religious) enemy who has to be destroyed: "At the peak of great politics, *faith* fights *errant faith*" (Meier 1998, p. 60).

Schmitt does not, however, use explicitly religious or theological jargon in most of his work defending the political against liberalism. Indeed, if there is a metaphysical or theological core in Schmitt, it is well hidden behind a struggle for the political. In Meier's view, "Schmitt embarks upon his confrontation with liberalism in the name of the political, and he pursues it for the sake of religion" (Meier 1995, p. 30). The problem, states Meier, is that liberalism turns every metaphysical question into a discussion, while Schmitt does not

want to submit his metaphysics to a debate. Revelation cannot be discussed with unbelievers in the first place.

For Meier, Schmitt's notion of the political cannot but be founded on theology: "(t)he 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'" (Meier 1995, p. 55-56). It is because of this theological basis that the political can become the total: both engage the human being existentially and totally. The affirmation of the political by Schmitt is thus nothing but a veiled struggle for substantial theological positions. He who denies political enmity, positions himself on the side of Satan. All attempts to overcome enmity are then seen as temptations of the antichrist to realize peace on earth against God's will.

With his attempt to render Schmitt's theological underpinnings explicit, Meier's aim is to sharpen the distinction between political theology and political philosophy. Meier himself defends philosophy against theology. Ultimately, one is tempted to draw the conclusion from Meier's writing that philosophers do not have much to learn from Schmitt.

Between de Maistre and Hobbes

Discussions of the so-called 'theological turn' in the interpretation of Schmitt focus on the meaning of 'political theology,' a notion he reintroduced into philosophical dialogue through his two books after this concept *Political Theology* (1922) and *Political Theology II* (1970). Attempting to define this notion, Schmitt writes in his 1922 book: "All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularised theological concepts not only because of

their historical development (…) but also because of their systematic structure" (Schmitt 1988, p. 36). The sentiment of Schmitt's statement is not easy to grasp. On the one hand, Schmitt tries to think the 'structure' of juridical-political concepts as analogous to the structure of theological thinking. He states, for instance, that "(t)he exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology." The analogies he points to are formal: they ought to permit a "sociology of legal concepts" (p. 42), that investigates their structural analogies or equivalences. However, by referring to Catholic counterrevolutionary philosophers such as Bonald, de Maistre, and Donoso Cortés as those who realised "(t)he most interesting political application of such analogies," (p. 37) he seems to suggest that more is at stake in the relationship between political and theological paradigms than merely formal or structural analogies.

Still, authors such as de Maistre use a significantly different jargon than Schmitt. De Maistre had a more directly religious interpretation of political events, which comes close to the kind of thinking Meier attributed to Schmitt. For example, de Maistre considered the French Revolution to be a manifestation of God through a human event (De Maistre 2003, p. 41): it constituted a punishment from God intended to regenerate the Frenchmen, and in particular the French clergy. The revolution thus had a deeper religious and even 'satanic' meaning, which de Maistre purports to uncover. It is no coincidence that the original title of de Maistre's book on France was *Considérations religieuses sur la France*. De Maistre's politics was an application of his religious views; his jargon seems to come straight from the French seventeenth century theologian Bossuet.

One has to delve very deeply into Schmitt's texts to find any evidence for a similarly religious interpretation of historical events, and even then, the results will be meagre. Consequently, Meier's presupposition of a 'hidden' core has great methodological problems.

Although Schmitt was a believer, his political thinking does not require any religious element in order for it to be conceptually coherent, as will be made clear below. Moreover, Schmitt considers himself first and foremost to be an heir to the *Jus Publicum Europaeum*, which was founded on the jurists' statement "*silete theologi in munere alieno*" (Schmitt 2002, p. 70, 2003, p. 126), which the jurists upheld in their attempt to emancipate themselves from theologian tutelage. The sovereign state, which was crucial to their project, was an attempt to transcend religious civil war, and to thereby emancipate the political from religion. Although Schmitt references Hobbes' phrase "Jesus is the Christ," this proposition is not conceptually necessary to make sense of the Hobbesian framework. Indeed, the use of this phrase cannot conceal the profound difference that remains between the profane political theory of Hobbes and (reactionary) Catholicism (Maschke 1988, Paléologue 2004, p. 30).

The difference is most clearly marked by the decisionist adage Schmitt upholds: "*Auctoritas, non veritas fecit legem*" (1988, p. 52). Schmitt's attempt to combine this kind of decisionism with the thoughts of Hobbes and de Maistre within one framework is not evident. Indeed, while Schmitt argues that decision is crucial for the political, de Maistre is only interested in a specific kind of decision made by a specific subject, namely the pope (De Maistre 1966).

Nevertheless, Schmitt tries to show that de Maistre upheld the kind of decisionism he was advocating himself, by underscoring that for de Maistre, the stress was on the fact of the decision, more than on its content. Even though de Maistre's proclaimed interest was in papal infallibility, Schmitt states that for de Maistre, "infallibility and sovereignty were 'perfectly synonymous'" (1988, p. 55). However, Schmitt tends to overlook that there are different concepts of decision at play here. Firstly, de Maistre focuses mainly on papal infallibility with regard to dogmatic issues rather than to issues of custom and public law

(1966, p. 121). Secondly, even if both authors agree in practice on the necessity of a final decision against which no appeal is possible, important differences remain. What was at stake for de Maistre in his book on the pope was to show that deliberation in the councils, as it was demanded by some of his opponents, does not usually add any substantial content to the papal decision. Demanding these general councils to be held is for de Maistre merely the expression of a sentiment of revolt, which could turn even the councils against themselves.

Schmitt's concern is of a different sort. He is interested in order as such and this requires a sovereign decision for which truth is strictly irrelevant. One of the polemic adversaries of Schmitt's *Political Theology* is normativism, which does not see that norms cannot realize themselves, but rather, require decisions for their realization. Schmitt's stress is thus on decision as a crucial moment of the realization of law. This moment is almost a technical issue (McCormick 1999). Contrary to de Maistre, for whom truth and infallibility remain central, Schmitt is not concerned with the content of the decision (apart from the fact that the decision must create order, a homogeneous medium in which law can function properly). While de Maistre explicitly defends the idea that all authority comes from God, there is not one element in Schmitt that goes in that direction. For him it is an open question as to who the deciding subject is (although within the specific context of the Weimar Republic, he advocates a strong president with exceptional powers), and not a matter of dogma, as it is for de Maistre.

Both views on the self-understanding of a political unity engender notably different effects. For de Maistre, the papal decision constitutes infallible truth, while for Schmitt, the decision remains simply a decision to realize law, truth being irrelevant. The fact that de Maistre considers the power of the sovereign to be deeply moral (2003, p. 169) must appear very strange for more secularised thinkers such as Hobbes and Schmitt, who ask for political

order, not for moral truth. It was exactly the "*Rechthaberei*" around such truths which generated the cruel religious wars the political theory of sovereignty wanted to overcome.

Only when order and truth became disentangled from one another did the notion of sovereignty appeared in the first place. In his book on conservatism (1986), Panajotis Kondylis lays out what is at stake in this notion. According to him, conservatism consisted specifically in the attempt to maintain the premodern *societas civilis* and especially its ruling strata (p. 23). The *societas civilis* was the encompassing juridical order of premodernity, which was torn apart by the modern separation of state and civil society. It was conceived of as being founded on an order of being attributed to God's will. The concept of sovereignty appeared only when this order, based on a strict unity of politics, morality and religion, was no longer evident. According to Kondylis, "he who argues for the future recovery of this unity, fundamentally wishes the annihilation of modern sovereignty" (p. 77).

As Schmitt emphasized time and again, the appeal to the substantial truth of a particular order can lead to a form of "*Rechthaberei*," which makes order as such impossible, as modern order can only consist of a relative stabilization of conflictual relations between friends and enemies (Schmitt 2002, p. 65, 1995, p. 218). With his infamous "*Auctoritas, non veritas*," Schmitt wanted to get rid of precisely the standpoint which claims absolute truth, because such a standpoint endlessly undermines every constituted order.

An additional difference between Schmitt and the Catholic counterrevolutionary thinkers is that the notion of crisis or of chaos, which is fundamental to Schmitt's well-known concept of the exception, was lacking in the Christian view of order (1993, p. 22). A notion of crisis or chaos is, however, crucial for a modern understanding of creating order and Schmitt places it at the center of his theory of the sovereign as "he who decides on the exception" (1988, p. 5). Consciousness of the crisis-ridden nature of modernity entails a

wholly different notion of decision than the decision of God, which is, as Schmitt says, not a pure decision, but is always already 'in order' (1993, p. 22).

Although he tries to strategically align himself with the Catholic counterrevolutionaries, Schmitt develops a notion of sovereignty that is highly formal and can thus easily be turned against the visions of these counterrevolutionary authors. This formalism returns in his book *The Concept of the Political*, where he argues that every social relation, whatever its substantial content, can become political, i.e. can be intensified into a friend/enemy relation. It is no coincidence that many authors have denounced Schmitt as a nihilist who advocates decision irrespective of substantial truth (Löwith 1995). Such a denunciation would be impossible if Schmitt did indeed uphold the moral and religious aims Meier ascribes to him, or those which de Maistre was openly fighting for.

Schmitt's metapolitics and the meaning of political theology

What does Schmitt's so-called 'political theology' mean then? My hypothesis is that one cannot understand what is at stake in the enigmatic 1922 book if one does not take into account the philosophical strategy that is at play in many of Schmitt's most important 1920s texts. This strategy consists in a polemic between ways of thinking, or 'types of spirit,' as Schmitt called them (Schmitt 1996c, p. 11). Of course, Schmitt's texts are also interventions in concrete political conjunctures, incidentally targeting specific political actors, like the Bolsheviks, the anarchists, the romantics, and the liberal bourgeoisie. But from a philosophical perspective, more is at stake. The polemic in which Schmitt engages is not just a polemic on the level of politics, but on the level of what Schmitt calls 'spirit,' and on which

'the political' is situated. His polemic consistently opposes 'the political' or 'the specific logic of juristic thinking' to 'technical-economic thinking,' liberalism, normativism, or 'natural-scientific thinking' (1988, p. 52). Schmitt thus develops a metapolitical strategy: an intellectual or spiritual fight for 'the political' as such, against ways of thinking which threaten it.

In his 1929 lecture on 'Neutralisations and Depoliticizations' for instance, Schmitt does not attack technology as such, but technicity, i.e., the spirit of technical thinking that neutralizes the political (1991b, p. 79-95). This spirit can be at work outside the strict sphere of technology; in parliament, for instance, or certain procedural understandings of popular participation. A similar criticism of technical and economic thinking as unable to think political form is central to the 1923 book *Roman Catholicism and Political Form* (1996c). In *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (1992)[1], it is the 'intellectual circumstances' (p. 1) of parliament that are at stake for Schmitt. He attempts to show how parliament's underlying liberal and technical spiritual principles make it impossible to think of the parliamentary institution as a political one.

While in many of these texts 'the political' is developed as merely the negative other to ways of thinking Schmitt opposes, his book *Political Theology* represents one of the few instances in which Schmitt gives positive clues as to the type of 'spirit' he aspires to find. Schmitt wrote *Political Theology* after his book on dictatorship (1994), in which he emphasized the distinction between the norm and its realization through a '*Rechtsverwerklichungsnorm*,' and the necessity of a decision to bridge the two. This moment of decision could not be thought within the dominant rationalist and normativistic approaches to law, Schmitt observed. That is why he became interested in theology, as he could draw on the conceptual structure of

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[1] Its German title, *Die geistesgeschichtliche Lage des heutigen Parlamentarismus*, discloses with greater clarity what was at stake in this text, namely to uncover the 'spirit' behind the parliamentary institutions.

theology to enable a genuine juridical-political thinking that takes the moment of decision seriously. Although he focuses mainly on the notion of sovereignty, showing the analogy between the exception in politics and the miracle in theology, he immediately enlarges the perspective to develop a sociology of concepts, which investigates such analogies more generally.

Thus, the title of Schmitt's book must not be misunderstood. This is not a book on theology in the strict sense of the word; it is a text on law and sovereignty and on the type of conceptualisation that is required to think them. Schmitt's *Political Theology* does not (re)open a long neglected field of scholarly research, but tries to find a conceptual model which allows for thinking the political. In this regard, the title does not refer to a substantial field of research, but to an ongoing metapolitical struggle.

That *Political Theology* is a polemic book is clear from its severe attacks against the anarchist Bakunin. It must be underlined that Schmitt was not the first modern thinker to use the expression 'political theology': it was already employed by Michael Bakunin, who used it as a polemical weapon against Mazzini in several of his texts on Italy (Bakunin 1961). Mazzini was an exceptional man, according Bakunin, but fell prey to religious, metaphysical and political idealism; that is, he ended up in the camp of God, of divine order and of the principle of authority, against the "believers in humanity" (p. 4). Bakunin strongly vilified Mazzini's alliance with the existing order which stood in opposition to the International, and attacked his theological preaching against the Paris Commune. In opposition to this so-called "political theology," Bakunin demands "satanic freedom," the freedom of revolt, which, according to him, has its source in animal life and is connected to scientific thinking (p. 40).

By reappropriating the term political theology, Schmitt is not offering up a defence of Mazzini's strand of theologically and morally inspired politics. Indeed, never in his book

does Schmitt give any argument in that direction. His aim is to attack a politics which is incapable of thinking itself as political because it uses scientific or humanitarian arguments.

Despite the seemingly non-political discourse of Bakunin, Schmitt shows the unavoidability of a moment of decision in Bakunin's practice of struggle. That is why at the end of *Political Theology*, even Bakunin is depicted as a "theologian" (in the specific Schmittian sense) precisely because he decides. At exactly this point he becomes "in theory the theologian of the antitheological and in practice the dictator of an antidictatorship" (1988, p. 66). When someone who decides politically tries to give an account of this very act of decision, her thought inevitably becomes theological in the specific sense Schmitt attaches to this notion, namely, thought which is structurally similar to theological reasoning, in opposition to scientific, technical, economic or moralistic thinking. This is even the case when people like Bakunin would reject such a qualification. This supports the claim that what is at stake for Schmitt is not simply to take part in a struggle between atheist and religious forces, but to make visible the contradiction between crude materialism and genuine political thinking. A materialist cannot avoid deciding in politics, but does not understand what she does in such cases.

There is thus a shift of problematic at play here. We are no longer dealing with a simple opposition to atheism, but with the conceptual logic or structure that underlies any kind of political decision. We are here on the metalevel of Schmitt's research into the formal philosophical underpinnings of genuine political thought. The term 'political theology' is then not a weapon in a fight between substantially defined parties, as in Bakunin's fight against Mazzini, but figures on a metapolitical terrain of struggle against conceptual structures that tend to obscure the political. The problem with Bakunin, in sum, is that he tends to depoliticize his position with his discourse on humanity, animal life and scientifically

guided politics. Schmitt wants to show that all thought which is genuinely political has another kind of logic or conceptual structure than that of natural-scientific, economic, moral or technical thinking. Real political thinking implies a transcendent moment of decision for which theology provides some conceptual direction. Whether one acknowledges this or not, from the moment one decides, one has left the spirit of natural science and technique.

One thus has to distinguish Schmitt's political theology from other approaches often categorized under the same heading, such as liberation theology and the political doctrines of the Church Fathers. According to Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, neat distinctions have to be drawn between three types of political theology (1993). Firstly, there is institutional political theology, which judges the status, the legitimation, the structure and the task of the political order, on the basis of belief in God. The works of Augustinus and Luther feature as examples of this first type of political theology. Secondly, there is appellative political theology, which interprets the gospel in such a way as to incite the believer to commit herself to a particular cause (justice, liberation, etcetera). Liberation theology is a case in point: it carries the risk, according to Böckenförde, of turning into a "theologizing politics."

Thirdly, there is Schmitt's approach, which differs from both of these. Böckenförde calls it "juridical political theology," as it focuses on the transfer of theological concepts to the domains of state and law, through which divine attributes (*potestas absoluta, creatio ex nihilo, norma normans, potestas constituens…*) are ascribed to worldly powers like the state or the people. It is about "fundamentally systematic and methodical analogies" between concepts on the basis of their "systematic structure." This sociology of concepts, accordingly, "aims to discover the basic, radically systematic structure and to compare this conceptual structure with the conceptually represented social structure of a certain epoch" (Schmitt 1988, p. 45). The central question of this sociology is not whether certain concepts can be seen as

reflections of a social reality, but whether structural similarities can be found between conceptual structures, by relating them to "the general state of consciousness" of a period. It thus has to push through to the level of metaphysics and theology: "The metaphysical image that a definite epoch forges of the world has the same structure as what the world immediately understands to be appropriate as a form of its political organization" (1988, p. 46).

What Schmitt exactly means with his 'radical sociology' remains hard to disclose. One can, however, show how the relation between theology and politics in this sociology of concepts differs from the nominally similar relations in both liberation theology and Max Weber's approach from *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (2001). The link between theology (or metaphysics) and political concepts in Schmitt's work is far more structural and formal than in liberation theology or in the comparison Weber makes between theology and the spirit of capitalism.

Schmitt's radical sociology has often been related to Weber's analysis of Protestantism (Rasch 2004, p. 4). However, the interconnection between theology and social reality in Weber was more intricate than the one between theology and the political in Schmitt. Weber focused on the way a social group appropriated the theology of Calvin, and not on the conceptual structure of this doctrine, as Schmitt did. Weber establishes correlations between social facts, Schmitt between series of conceptualisations.

According to Catherine Colliot-Thélène, Weber's sociology attempted "to draw out elective affinities between certain ideas and the social milieux (sic) whose conditions favour the inacceptance or production" (Mouffe 1999, p. 143). For Schmitt, this boils down to a kind of psychology, that is not capable of grasping the conceptual structure itself. The

sociological analysis of a juridical concept cannot limit itself, for example, to showing the character and historical development of a social group of law scholars.

In his study of liberation theology, Michael Löwy elaborates upon Weber's notion of "elective affinities" to analyse the convergences between cultural structures (Löwy 1998, p. 58): "On the basis of certain analogies, certain affinities, certain correspondences, two cultural structures can – in certain historical circumstances – form a relation of attraction, of choice, of mutual selection" (p. 102). This elective affinity is founded upon a 'common matrix of political and religious beliefs.' Even though this approach is not subject to the Schmittian critique of being merely a kind of social psychology, its analysis in terms of "elective affinities" remains much more substantial than Schmitt's sociology of concepts. Indeed, the structural similarities between theological and juridical-political thinking in Schmitt do not imply any substantial common matrix of concepts, but only formal equivalences between different matrices of concepts. It is the common matrix of concepts between religion and politics (in the case of liberation theology, Christianity and socialism) which enabled liberation theology to lead to a theologization of politics, which is precisely what Schmitt rejects.

The equivalences between theology and juridical-political thinking must thus be of a highly formal and generic kind. In this sense, it seems one step too far to say, as William Rasch does in his book on Schmitt, that the "sovereign, as a mortal God, mimics divinity" (2004, p. 4). As Schmitt states, political theology "is not concerned with any theological dogma but with a scholarly-theoretical and conceptual-historical problem: the structural identity of concepts, of theological and juridical argumentation and cognition" (quoted in 1996c, p. xiv).

Theology without god

As stated, what Schmitt aims to accomplish in his political theology is to think the decision and the process of giving form to society. This cannot be done without a moment of transcendence, that is, without a gap between norm and fact which has to be bridged by a decision. It is this moment of transcendence for which Schmitt is seeking an equivalent form of thought in theology. However, despite all the analogies, one cannot overlook the deep differences that remain between the sovereign decision and the divine decision or miracle, or in other words, between theological and juridical transcendence. Schmitt underscores this difference himself (1995, p. 144, 1996b, p. 33-34, Ulmen 1983, p. 38).

The juridical transcendence Schmitt is hinting at is a kind of transcendence within immanence: "It is immanent to the degree that it takes place within immanence. However, it is transcendent inasmuch as it is inconceivable to the concept, in other words, it is not possible to appropriate within rationalist schemes" (Ojakangas 2005, p. 29). The immanence to which juridical transcendence is opposed is a rationalist, economic or technical one, governed, for instance, by the law of causality. On such a basis, politics and law cannot be thought according to Schmitt. That is why the concept of sovereignty cannot be simply understood as "the highest power," because "[i]n political reality there is no irresistible highest or greatest power that operates according to the certainty of natural law" (1988, p. 17). The quest for such a "highest power" would imply a return to the immanent logic of causality, on the basis of which the political cannot be thought. Therefore, it is the connection of actual power to the legally highest power that is "the fundamental problem of the concept of sovereignty."

As said, Schmitt thinks he can find in theology a structural equivalent for the kind of decisionist or juridical transcendence he needs for thinking the political. It is in this sense that one can speak about the "immanent theologicity of the political" (Nicoletti 1988, p. 125). This notion of theologicity points to a kind of 'spirit' in a way similar to the notion of 'technicity' in Schmitt's famous text on neutralizations and depoliticizations.

As Théodore Paléologue states, however, it is impossible to draw a kind of Mendeleev's Table of political thinking that would establish clear correspondences between theology and politics (2004, p. 284). For this reason, all attempts to uncover the specific strand of theology that would be at the basis of Schmitt's political thought are vain. Such approaches miss the project truly at stake in Schmitt's philosophical work; Schmitt endeavors to find a 'spirit' that enables one to think the political, rather than to find a politics that is the correct expression of a religious position.

This entails that the 'theologicity' of genuine political thinking should not be interpreted too narrowly. Despite the 'structural analogies' there remains, for instance, a deep difference between sovereign decisions and divine miracles: the political sovereign is not as 'free' to decide as the god of religion; while the miracle is a question of pure divine grace, the sovereign is forced to decide. Schmitt stresses that some of the Catholic counterrevolutionaries understood that their time *necessitated* a decision: it was not a question of purely free will, it was a question of urgency in a context of crisis and extreme peril to the state, which Schmitt analyzes as the 'exception' (1988, p. 6). One could not choose not to decide. While divine intervention through miracles is purely free and subjective, there is always something which precedes the sovereign and which forces him to decide.

The existential need to decide draws the sovereign onto a plane of immanence, on which politics is a question of deciding at the right moment, of thinking instrumentally in

order to reach a concrete objective, such as the installation or restoration of order (Schmitt 1994, p. xvii-xviii). Moreover, the genuine sovereign decision has a teleological character (Kalyvas 2005): its decision is not purely arbitrary, but must be oriented toward the foundation of a juridical order; it has to create a "homogenous medium" which permits law to be realized (Schmitt 1988, p. 13). That is why the sovereign is situated simultaneously inside and outside of the legal system: he is outside of it insofar as he has to found it, but he is inside of it in that his activity is teleologically oriented toward this juridical order.

Schmitt does not give any indications as to what the sovereign has to decide in a substantial way. Sovereignty in this sense possibly becomes a profanating power, against which divine laws are unable to resist. Its logic of juridical transcendence acknowledges the cleavage between the order and its origin, which entails an unavoidable contingency. As Carlo Galli has stated, the coherence of Schmitt's dispersed oeuvre is to be found in his diagnosis of the end of modern political rationalism (1996). For Schmitt, it is impossible to rationally mediate all crises or contradictions. Moving beyond the philosophical rationalism of natural rights theories, and beyond the attempts at systemic closure in positivism, Schmitt reaches a point where rational mediation becomes impossible (Kervégan 2005, p. 25). This is a point where contingency reigns and which requires a decision that can never be totally subsumed under a norm. This, then, is Schmitt's starting point: the origin of modern politics lacks an objective foundation. It is bottomless. As this moment, which cannot be subsumed or mediated, is of course dangerous, it has to be openly acknowledged as such. When this is forgotten, the core of modern politics, namely the contingent moment of decision, is lost. This core is what the political had won by emancipating itself from religion and is also that which makes opposition and plurality possible. When one tries to found a political order ethically, metaphysically, theologically or through reliance on a philosophy of history, one

risks closing off the possibility of opposition and of alternatives. Liberalism, with its substantial conception of the human as the basis of order, and philosophies of history tend to reduce this contingency of the decision too much. Schmitt's theory of sovereignty is thus strictly incompatible with a theological politics that wants to ground order again on the basis of substantial doctrines.

The fact that there is a structural similarity between theism and sovereignty does not mean the one presupposes the other. On the contrary, the emancipation of the political from overarching worldviews such as religion has created a worldly instance of decision, against which the defenders of the premodern order of *societas civilis* were strongly opposed. When man takes the place of the decision to create order, the result is a "theology without god," whose profanity can barely be concealed by the Hobbesian formula of the "mortal god" (Bensaid 2008, p. 80).

Beyond secularization

Although he is highly critical of secularization, Schmitt does not, as the Catholic counterrevolutionaries tend to do, preach a return to a premodern, pre-secularised situation. Instead, he tries to find a modern, political answer to secularization and the dangers it entails. The main risk of secularization paradoxically consists in the return of something that was central to premodern society, namely the absolutization of enmity through notions of just war and the like. In a modern society, the threats to the genuinely political relation between friends and enemies are multiple and complex. The demise of political plurality happens either through depoliticisation as a consequence of economic-technical or natural-

scientific thinking, or through hyperpoliticization, which absolutizes enmity with the help of substantial theological or moralistic constructions. For Schmitt, the genuinely political relation requires the relativization of enmity. When the enemy is absolute, political order is in principle impossible, as he simply has to be annihilated through a struggle which knows no end (Lievens 2009).

The creation of a configuration of relative enmity is the issue at stake in the metapolitical battle Schmitt wages. Authors such as Heinrich Meier tend to downplay the importance between the different types of enmity Schmitt distinguishes (absolute versus relative enmity, relative enmity encompassing conventional enmity and certain forms of real enmity). For him, all kinds of enemies are simply variations on the same theme. "Schmitt's later differentiation between the 'conventional,' the 'real,' and the 'absolute enemy'," he states, "(…) is not decisive for the concept of the political. It is in no way demanded, and certainly not given a foundation, by the concept of the political" (Meier 1995, p. 26). This is to overlook the argument against absolute enmity which recurs throughout Schmitt's oeuvre. This argument rests on the idea that with enmity becoming absolute, political order turns out to be impossible, as eternal strife is its result. Absolute enmity arises when the enemy is, for example, fought in the name of progress, humanity or values, each of which contains a logic of annihilation of the other.[2]

By defending the political, understood in terms of relative enmity, Schmitt picks up the legacy of secularization, but attempts to ward off its dangerous side-effects, which are, paradoxically, often the result of a lack of secularization, or of the return, in other guises, of

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[2] In one rare passage which seems to contain an implicit critique of Nazism, a party with which he allied himself between 1933 and 1936, he suggests the notion of *Übermensch* is a radicalisation of such humanitarian thinking (Schmitt 1950a, p. 111-112). Within the framework of this article, we cannot go into the difficult debate about how to deal with Schmitt's problematic political stances in the thirties. The clue to disentangling what is interesting in Schmitt from what is problematic, however, is the distinction between the political and politics, and the observation that the importance of Schmitt's metapolitical strategy goes far beyond his problematic politics.

what preceded the modern era. For him, secularization entails the replacement of god as absolute authority by more "mundane and worldly factors" (1986, p. 17-18). The absolute thus shifts from one instance to another. But Schmitt does not stop there. What is crucial for understanding Schmitt's concept of the political, is his attempt to relativize absolute oppositions. This culminated in his theory of the "bracketing of war" [*Hegung des Krieges*] (Schmitt 2003).

In *Ex Captivitate Salus*, Schmitt describes the process of secularization, in which law scholars are the protagonists, as "an exodus from a holy mountain to the area of the profane" (2002, p. 70). On their trip, the law scholars took a number of sanctuaries with them, as the worldly kings tended to use arguments which had a "spiritual origin." The political situation which thus came about in the classical age of the *Jus Publicum Europaeum* was one which left the '*Rechthaberei* of fighting theologians' behind, and made it possible for conflicts to be fought out in an orderly way and with a certain respect for the enemy (p. 65). The creation of the modern state was motivated by a feeling of "despair" resulting from the religious wars of the 16th century and from the sentiment that world history had lost its higher meaning. It was this despair which led people like Hobbes in the direction of enlightenment, according to Schmitt. Hobbes provided one of the first 'critiques of religion and of the bible,' and was an "enlightener and agnostic" (p. 67). However, his form of enlightenment was not as substantial and moralistic as it would become with the 18th century philosophers (p. 68).

The result of this step out of religious warfare towards the political was a "dangerous intermediate situation." The law scholars "cancelled the influence of theologians and set themselves free from ecclesiastical institutions" (p. 72). But because of this move, they arrived "on the side of enlightenment and progress." This intermediate situation was very

unstable, as it was attacked from two sides: not only from the side of theology, but also from that of consistently rationalist enlighteners. The law scholars were rationalists, although "not in the sense of positivism and pure technicity" (p. 72). They tried to stem the tendency towards "pure profanation" which would nevertheless become dominant in the current technical age. An important passage in Schmitt's post war notebooks underlines where this intermediate stage should be situated:

> "Between theology and technique, that means between totalitarian areas. Theology is necessarily totalitarian from the point of view of substance, of result, technique is totalitarian from the perspective of method, function. The result is always totality. In-between stands the jurisprudence of western rationalism; it is not totalitarian, but *ad alterum*; its institution is the state, which distinguishes public and private law; it preserves law, law is *ad alterum. Audiatur et altera pars.* Theology nor technique know that" (1991a, p. 311).

This position "in-between theology and technique" is also what Schmitt seeks to defend in his struggle for the political, which is based on reciprocal recognition between enemies and is thus "*ad alterum.*" The political, too, is attacked from two sides: by depoliticising discourses on the one hand, and hyperpoliticising approaches on the other. As it is based on relative instead of absolute enmity, it follows the trend of secularisation, but avoids its dangerous conclusions. Confronted with secularization, one could attempt to take a step back, into religion, as Joseph de Maistre and Louis de Bonald did to a certain extent. But that is not the logic of Schmitt's concept of the political; rather, the logic of the political endeavours to acknowledge the modern situation, and to find a way to install order despite the lack of an overarching substantial worldview. This can only be done if enmity is recognized and given its due place within this order, i.e. by relativizing it.

Confronted with secularization, Schmitt thus goes one step further. It is striking, for instance, how Schmitt considers value philosophy, which is one discursive tool to absolutlize enmity, as the spectral reappearance of the old gods. According to Schmitt, when one refers to values in struggle, one inevitably ends up denying the dignity of the opponent, as the logic of values leads to his annihilation as a non-value. In *Die Tyrannei der Werte* Schmitt calls values in the name of which struggles are being waged "spectral" (1979). In modern, secularized society, values and the human decision based on them have taken the place of the gods as the absolute instances. As Schmitt says, "[t]hat the old gods have been disenchanted and have become merely obtaining values makes the struggle spectral and the fighters desperately *'rechthaberisch'.*" (p. 32) The specter of the deceased gods manifests itself in the logic of absolute enmity. Schmitt speaks about this spectral reappearance of the absolute within value philosophy as of a nightmare. With the conflict between values, he says, the gods have stood up from their graves again:

> "The old gods raise from their graves and fight their old struggle again, but in a disenchanted way, and (…) with new means of struggle, which are no longer weapons, but horrible means of annihilation and extinction methods, appalling products of value free science and of the industry and technique it controls." (p. 31-32)

This spectral appearance makes the current time impure: even though we thought to have left religion behind, the era of value philosophy and moralism has brought absolute enmity back, and thus remained religious par excellence. When one reintroduces absolute enmity, one brings religion or theology back in the place of politics. As Schmitt says, "he who wants to annihilate me, is not my enemy, but my satanic prosecutor" (1991a, p. 190). Diverse ways of thinking that annihilate political plurality and relative enmity are referred to as a form of

religion by Schmitt. He calls technicity a form of mass religion (1991b); the ideal of world unity is considered "a spare religion" (1990, p. 239); and, similarly, the discourse on "absolute humanity," which opens the way towards an inhuman terror, is called a 'pseudo-religion' (1950a, p. 108).

The political paradoxically attempts to overcome this spectral reappearance of the gods by finding a space beyond the theologization of enmity. This adds complexity to Schmitt's problematic of secularization. One abolishes the political when one returns to absolute enmity, which is haunted by the specter of the religious wars. At the same time, one cannot think the political without a certain theological way of thinking. This complexity shows that Schmitt does not start from a theological position to see how it can be articulated politically, but rather from the political in a search for spiritual sources to think it and to demarcate it from its other. In fact, the political, with its stress on decision, relative enmity and reciprocal recognition, becomes a criterion to judge theological positions, or theological ruminations *in politicis*.

The paradox is that those who want to liquidate the theological roots of the political more rigorously, for instance by striving for a world of technique and "pure profanation," fall back into theology more easily, as they cannot succeed but by making their enemy absolute. Indeed, actively "liquidating" what one considers to be the remnant of theology paradoxically turns itself into a kind of absolute enmity. It is only by recognizing the theological roots of the political and their structural analogies that one really can emancipate oneself from religion and from the absolute enmity it implies. Schmitt does not struggle against atheism in favor of religion, but he fights on a metalevel for the political, or, in other words, against 'bad' forms of secularization, and for 'good' forms which leave the specter of the gods behind.

Keeping history profane

To summarize: Schmitt is looking for a way to think the political in a pure way, in order to overcome all tendencies towards absolute enmity which result from unclear distinctions. At the same time, however, Schmitt relies on theology as a source to think the political. This seeming inconsistency can only be resolved by stressing the formal character of this theology, as a form of thinking which cannot be reduced to substantial contents.

Yet, although the equivalence between sovereign and god is merely formal or structural, there is one figure in Schmitt's political thought that seems to transfer more directly from theology. It is the katechon, the force which according to Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians had to restrain the coming of the Antichrist. Schmitt's references to the katechon are, however, very diffuse, to the extent that scholars who studied them had great difficulty in finding a coherent core (Paléologue 2004, p. 64, Grossheutschi 1996). The lack of clarity on the concept of the katechon made it possible to interpret it in very creative ways. Paolo Virno, for instance, has reconstructed the katechon as a figure that oscillates between Hobbes' civil and natural state, keeping human beings bad and restraining evil by tolerating it to a certain extent (2005). Being a force that staves off the end of the world, it maintains the openness of the human animal to the world. To this effect, the katechon is the force that restrains the abolition of human evilness, which was the objective, according to Virno, of the Hobbesian transition from the state of nature to the civil state. In this sense, Virno generalizes the katechon as a force that is present in all institutions, not only in state institutions. The concept of sovereignty presupposes the concept of the katechon, in the

same way as Schmitt stated that the concept of the state presupposes the concept of the political. The katechon thus appears as a force which precedes sovereignty, and whose specific function is to retain an openness, an ambiguity between state of nature and civil state, the possibility of ever newly arising conflicts or exceptions.

In many of Schmitt's passages referring to the katechon, this figure appears as a force that holds back the end of time which would result from the unification of the world, the victory of planning and technical thinking, or from certain messianic philosophies of history (1991a, p. 165; 1950b, p. 930; 1985, p. 429). According to Schmitt, the eschatological perspective of the end of time leads to paralysis (1950b, p. 929-930). Action, and especially political action, then becomes impossible.

The function of the katechon in Schmitt's thought seems to be situated precisely here: in maintaining the possibility of political action against eschatological paralysis. William Rasch asks the right question in this regard: "What if the katechon were not primarily a theological figure, but a political one, or rather a figure of the political itself?" (2004, p. 100) Indeed, "denying God – or at least denying His intervention in the world of the political – is precisely what the *katechon* does" (p. 99). And, I would add, it is only through this denial that the political can arise in the first place. The political is conditional upon the refusal of the theologisation of the enemy. The katechon is what makes the political possible by refusing the intervention of any god, even a 'worldly' one, i.e., a human being who, in some fashion, takes the position of god in claiming to be able to definitively judge over the world, history and morality. Since the world has always been more or less political until now,[3] there must always have been a force which made sure the eschatological perspective was pushed away:

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[3] "If and when this condition (of a world without politics, ML) will appear, I do not know," Schmitt states (1996a, p. 53-54).

"One has to be able to indicate the katechon for each epoch of the last 1948 years. Its place was never unoccupied, if not, we would no longer have existed" (1991a, p. 63).

Just as the political in Schmitt is very formal, and ever new contents can become politicized, the same is valid for the katechontic function, which can be embodied by ever new instances or persons (cf. 2003). It is not necessarily a 'conservative' figure (as conservatism has lost its meaning in a modern society, according to Schmitt), but can be any force which averts the hyperpolitical annihilation of the relation of enmity through a kind of eschatological politics. The katechon can even be the people, those who are not involved in the process of planning, and this becomes a central feature in a world without politics according to Schmitt (1991a, p. 272). Even a social situation of hunger and powerlessness can become katechontic, as anarchist chaos is to be preferred to a non-political state of centralisation and planning.

Schmitt understood that modernity thrived on the idea of a final salvation. However, he considers this idea as potentially very dangerous for the political. If this is the case, thinking the political in a profane sense within an epoch that fundamentally thinks eschatologically presupposes an instance that keeps this perspective away, a gatekeeper who is positioned between the profanity of historical politics and the dangerous illusion of salvation through the final struggle of humanity. The katechon is this gatekeeper, the ultimate remainder of an eschatological image of history which has to keep history open and profane. It is the mimimal, seemingly theological precondition to keep history and theology apart. In this way, a figure drawn from eschatological discourse becomes the necessary guarantor of a profane conception of history and of the political in a modern society. It has to ward off the theologisation of the present.

Still, referring to the katechon as a 'theological' figure is not evident. This is already apparent from the contexts in which this figure appears in Schmitt. Almost no other clearly theological concept appears in these passages: the number of times Schmitt uses the word 'Antichrist' or speaks explicitly about the problem of eschatology in theological terms is extremely limited.[4] It makes far more sense, therefore, to focus on Schmitt's overt fight for the political and against a unified, technically planned world projected by ideologies of progress. In this regard, I would suggest that the interpretation of the notion of the katechon should be taken in a style similar to Derrida's notion of messianism, which he develops on the basis of Walter Benjamin's work. In his seminal book *Spectres de Marx*, Derrida speaks about "messianism without religion, a messianic, even, without messianism, an idea of justice" (1993, p. 102). In *Marx & Sons* he speaks about "messianicity" in reference to the same idea (2002). He borrows the notion of the messianic from Benjamin mainly to signify a specific experience of time, to "political temporality properly conceived" (Sprinker 1999, p. 36). The notion of messianicity refers to the undeconstructibility of the idea of justice and to the experience of promise: "the messianic appeal belongs to a universal structure, to this irreducible movement of historical openness to the future" (Derrida 1993, p. 266).

Derrida thus takes recourse to a theological figure, from which he abstracts the substantial religious or theological content. He does so and, indeed, is required to do so, in order to ward off the supposedly marxian utopia of a world without politics. As in Schmitt, in order to avoid the pitfall of a merely technical world, Derrida seems to have to take recourse to a kind of theological thinking. Still, the messianic for Derrida is not a religious category, but a profane structure of historical experience. It is strictly anti-utopian. To that

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[4] *The Nomos of the Earth* is one of the only books published by Schmitt where he discusses the concept of the katechon with explicit mention of the antichrist. He does this, however, in a chapter devoted to the medieval Christian Empire as the restrainer of the antichrist (2003, p. 59).

extent, there is even something 'katechontic' to it, as it strictly refuses the idea of an end time, and keeps the present open for political intervention.

Schmitt's conception of the katechon, Benjamin's "weak messianic force" and Derrida's "messianism without religion" (which has to be distinguished from Benjamin's concept, according to Derrida (Bensaïd 2001, p. 175-176)), converge in their rejection of progress and utopia (cf. De wit 1992, p. 336). The great difference separating Benjamin's position from those of the others consists in the fact that Benjamin's messianic intervention is not able to lead to a new political order. In *Critique of Violence*, for instance, Benjamin argued for divine violence, which was no longer creating or maintaining order. Benjamin thus tries to imagine "the possibility of a politics that exceeds the political" (Rasch 2004, p. 94). The notion of the katechon is radically opposed to this kind of messianism.

Derrida's approach is slightly different from Benjamin's. Although messianicity is considered by Alberto Moreiras to be "the formal counterpart to sovereignty, and thus antisovereign all the way through" (Moreiras 2004, p. 73), Derrida understood one cannot easily do away with the notions of sovereignty and order (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 1997, p. 59), though these need not be deconstructed. What is especially interesting in Derrida's notion of messianicity or messianism without religion is that it seems to be a radical application of the Schmittian kind of political theology, in that it draws on formalized theological figures to think a profane political experience. Should we not be able to talk about a kind of 'katechonticity,' following Derrida's rephrasing of a 'messianicity' or 'messianism without religion'? This notion of katechonticity would then be more soberly political than Derrida's messianicity, which still focuses heavily on an ethical perspective.

Schmitt's recourse to a theological image of history remains useful in his perspective to intensify the consciousness of the danger of an unpolitical world that threatens us and

which thereby has to be avoided. Without an eschatological perspective that must be opposed, we tend to lose the sense of our finitude and contingency. The notion of the katechon especially functions within Schmitt's polemic on the meaning of history. Just as the materialist conception was not enough for genuinely thinking the political according to Benjamin, Schmitt must have a strong image of history to be able to intensify his struggle for the political. The image of history he pursues does exactly that: it shows that the political, and thus also historical contingency, is threatened and calls for a force that can keep this threat at bay.

In this sense, Schmitt's image is more sober and more profane than Benjamin's. It is difficult to conceive of an image of history that is more parsimonious than that rendered by Schmitt's notion of the katechon. The katechon is no more than a weak, negative force that must keep history political and profane.

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