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The Political as a Theological Problem in the Thought of Carl Schmitt

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Introduction

The relationship between theology and politics, and separately between the theological and the political, is an essential question of Schmitt scholarship. The reappearance of theology in political theory has acted as a spectre of the relations between politics and ontology thought exercised by the end of the last century, which was of course to be the end of history. Schmitt's criticisms of liberalism and its bedfellows are in this respect figured by some as an unwelcome intrusion into a contemporary political theorising that has no need of theological speculation, or perhaps as an example of what inevitably happens in some dark and festering corner if rational political discourse fears or forgets to tread.

Asking how far specific concepts or ideas within Schmitt's work are theological can be misguided. Contemporary political theorists are not known for their astute handling of scholastic theology. But theology and politics, as Schmitt says, are intimately related, even if in a purely historical sense, and it is legitimate as an aim of intellectual history to try and discover what Schmitt meant by these terms, and whether his himself is

Section One: The Theological-Political Problem

Weimar's crises – constitutional, political, and theological – were, above all, crises of legitimacy; of the correct separation between public and private, and of the church and the state. This separation was, aptly, at the etymological root of the word *Öffentlichkeit* (hi)-1524.833 (hi)-

relationship to National Socialism as Schmitt, summarised the views of many in 1931, writing that "the ultimate significance of law and the state, and thus also the ultimate justification of philosophy of law and state, cannot be determined by philosophy itself, but by metaphysics or religion." This was a world in which theological contestation was not only important but actually central to political philosophical discourse and the legitimacy debate was the subject of various secularisation theorems, of which Schmitt's is only the most well-known. The idea that liberal conceptions of the state and of the human person were only reformulations of original theological ideas was not just the preserve of a few fringe theorists; as Leo Strauss declared, the "theologico-political problem" was the

Secularisation cannot be the result of a withdrawal of substance, it is instead a continuation of problems rather than of solutions, of questions rather than of answers. In this sense, legitimacy is not a hereditary category associated with tradition or lineage of underlying metaphysics, but precisely of failure of that metaphysics to provide answers to questions it itself poses, namely about God's sovereignty. The self-assertive rationalism of the modern age is thus an answer to legitimate theological questions that could not be answered by theology alone. Blumenberg accepts the essential thesis that Medieval theological nominalism (which we shall explore later in this dissertation) was the theologically

Section Two: Political Theobgy and History

Sceptics will suggest that this is a leap; simply because others (and suspicious conservative types at that) were linking God's sovereignty with the state at this time, this does not mean that it should necessarily follow that the question of sovereignty within the state is related

Political form, and the existence of the constitutionally-ordered state is, on this understanding, an imposition that arises from the contingent prevailing circumstances; it is not a self-legitimising system but is instead dependent upon, at least in the modern era, the constitution-making power of the people, who exist prior to and above every constitutional procedure.¹³

miraculous from theological discourse it becomes impossible to imagine the legal order as underpinned by

de Maistre or Donoso Cortés hope to support the personal sovereignty of the monarch through a politicisation of the theology of sovereignty if this was against the metaphysical movement of the age? When, for instance, the monopolisation of power by the state or by a particular political authority is said to be structurally comparable to the

omnipotent and all-powerful sovereign, rejects the notion of a self-legitimising and self-assertive human being. Human freedom is anathema to this despotic God, and Blumenberg thinks it politically essential to argue against this dangerous vision of sovereignty. The concept of God that prevailed in the time of the Middle Ages and Reformation, which saw the birth of the cooperation and mutual recognition between the two kingdoms and domains found in Augustine's teachings [of the heavenly and earthly cities], and-7 (,)-10 (Ó)18.167 (y Ó)24.161n

Section Three: Faith in the Decision

So if the above is Schmitt's historical project, why then continue the use of the category of the theological at all. If the relationship between the theological and the political in each time period is only about a structural resemblance of concepts, is only analogy, then why hasn't, on Schmitt's own logic, the political simply subsumed the theological? We come to the second Schmittian strategy, an elucidation of the metaphorical registers which best reflect ~~alices~~ of human nature as it exists in each historical period ~~its~~ relationship with the state.

Schmitz notes that Blumenberg's concept of "absolute metaphors," which offer the clearest view of the steady entwining of conceptual-historical and anthropological problems, "represent the never tangible, never assessable totality of reality." Absolute metaphors exist in a non-analytical realm and are the attempt of human reason to capture a reality which resists categorisation. A Telosptu6 (pt)-1j 1.21 Tc 0.11 Tw 12.962 0 Td () J -414.918 -20.3s 52d3 (t)-1.833

concept of the human being, is that man ceases to be human when he ceases to be political. The political, says, Strauss is necessary because it is given in human nature.

Schmitt firmly believes that all political ideas can be classified according to their anthropology and that all genuinely political theories presuppose man to be evil.⁴ In a note in *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt writes that man, if not checked, has an irresistible inclination to slide from passion to evil: animality, drives, passions, are the kernels of human nature. The metaphysical centre of all politics is present in this pessimistic anthropological contention, which is of course analogous to the doctrine of original sin. Blumenberg's entwining of conceptual-historical and anthropological problems is here represented by Schmitt's metaphysics, which at some points appears totally synonymous with political theology. By PTII, Schmitt argues that the immensely polymorphous realm of political theology or metaphysics contains naïve projections, numinous fantasies, reflective reductions of the unknown to that which is known, analogies between being and appearance (emphasis added). This little-commented-on passage can be a key for us, opening up Schmitt's metaphysical speculations as being a fundamental pupion.

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nothing but self-empowerment.³⁸ In Schmitt's argument, 'theological transcendence' is opposed to an immanence of human reason, which is an epistemological development eventually resulting in the rejection of decisionism. In 1970, reflecting on the current political mood, Schmitt's disdain for liberals, 'atheists, anarchists and positivist scientists' is made plain; he writes against self-expression, self-affirmation, and self-empowerment – one of the many phrases prefixed by 'I', 'a so-called auto-composition'.³⁹ For Schmitt, these ideologies are opposed to his own specific conception of the human person. This 'self-producing new human being' that results from a rejection of political theology discards all metaphysics entirely as well as anything resembling a 'religious anthropology'.⁴⁰ The 'new human being' is clearly a figure of horror for Schmitt, as the rejection of metaphysics is an artificiality associated with the supposedly non-metaphysical (but of course highly metaphysical) project of analytic scientific reasoning. It is impossible to escape metaphysics because 'the joy of negating is a creative joy; it has the ability to produce from nothingness that which was negated.'⁴¹ The work of Gavin Rae is extremely important here; as he writes, 'Schmitt understands that human cognition is limited; at some point, reason must give way to faith because cognition is, at the fundamental level, a matter of belief not knowledge.'⁴² De-theologisation thus maps a correlative relationship between the increasingly immanentist fields of legal theory (with Kelsen's eliding of the state and law), theology (a Protestant turn inwards and away from external mediation), and scientific forms of philosophy (the privileging of human reason) with the decline of transcendental theology and the concept of the decision.

The final section will address the idea of the *complexio oppositorum*⁴³ and the form of the Catholic Church but, for now, it should be enough to point out that this creation, which Schmitt takes to be the apex of all political form, exists in 'limitless ambiguity' based not only in formal dogma but in 'the union of antitheses' which 'extends to the ultimate socio-psychological roots of human motives and perceptions.'⁴⁴ This is worth repeating again: the *complexio oppositorum* is a complex of opposites based ultimately in faith (though Schmitt calls this a specific 'Catholic rationalism'⁴⁵ due to its being based in the logic of the decision)

³⁸ Ibid, p. 120

³⁹ Ibid, p. 34

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 129

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 34

⁴² Rae, G., 2016, *The Theology Of Carl Schmitt's Political Theology* *Political Theology* 17(6), p. 564

⁴³ Schmitt, C., 1923 (1996), *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, transl. Ulmen, G. L., (London: Greenwood Press) p. 7

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 8

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 14

morally encompasses the psychological and sociological nature of man. In other words, the political form that privileges the decision is the political form that truly recognises itself as political because its anthropology will be one which recognises the limits of human reason, allowing a space in which the theological or metaphysical can lay claim. In Schmitt's own words: "there is no politics without authority and no authority without an ethos of belief."⁴⁶

Schmitt's point appears to be that the foundation of the political and the foundation of the metaphysical are identical: a specific account of human nature focusing on the non-conceptual, myth-filled aporias which result from the attempt to overcome the limits of human reason. For Schmitt, then, the role of the decision in contemporary law is to undergird this natural aporia which results from the human inability to create totally-contained systems of norms. Any attempt at excluding the exception is simultaneously a metaphysical position that presumes the rationality of the human being. In other words, the rejection of transcendence is, for Schmitt, an impossible (and dangerous) rejection of human nature. The idea of progress, and of the rational person, and indeed the idea of normative law – these things are themselves metaphysical speculations. This is why the question of who decides, which is also a question of the right relationship between theology and politics, is always primarily theological. The Augustinian question of the relationship between the heavenly and the earthly cities – in the modern era the relationship between Church and state – can only be answered "in concreto, on behalf of the concrete, autonomously acting human being"⁴⁷ whose most fundamental relationship with the sovereign is always one of metaphysical assent to authority against an immanent self-assertion.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 13

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 17

⁴⁸ Schmitt, C., 1970 (2008) p. 115

have rightly pointed to this morass of ultra-conservative (and often highly Romantic) political and literary thought and its connections with Schmitt's oeuvre. Wolin is wrong, though, to suggest a mere nihilistic Heideggerian brutefacticity³ in Schmitt which revels in an aristocratic ecstasy of storm and steel.⁴ Wolin recognises that the power of decision is grounded in an insight superior to the subaltern capacities of human ratiocination⁵ but he imagines that all we are left with is a totalising nihilism. The idea that Schmitt's thought could make formal demands, in the sense of advocating a specific formal structure within which the decision can be made, is something he dismisses.

But if it is true, as was argued above, that the movement of the decision from the Church to the state is fundamental for Schmitt's political decisionism, then we should spend some time looking at this period and the exact theological assumptions and 4 . t 5 r o m c h o l m (t) 3 3 0 t 2 T 4 0

inviolable categories. This understanding of God leads to voluntarism which, very simply,

entire Weimar period because of a political form that privileged the decision and a fideist Catholic rationalism. The Protestant thought of Weimar is exceptionally important in theology but has made little headway into intellectual history. The remarkable disinterest in this theology has

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contributed to a 'demythologisation' of liberal secularity along with the role Christianity played within it.⁷⁴ 'Demythologisation' involved, in a similar manner to the Schmittian secularisation theorem, emphasising the dependency of modern conceptions of the state on the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The Barmen Declaration, for example, coordinated by Barth and published just few months after what Scholder called 'the summer of political theology',⁷⁵ was concerned with how the proper answers to the question of the sovereignty of God could and should inform the Church's position in relation to the new regime. The example of Barth shows how the voluntarist problem was mirrored in the political theology of Weimar. Schmitt's contention is that this sudden dissolution of the relationship between church and state necessitates decision on the proper relation between the theological and the political. This decision is lacking in Protestantism. As Schmitt writes, 'the separation' is an issue concerning the responsibility of legally institutionalised subjects, and not an issue concerning an objectifiable distinction between two domains.⁷⁶ The political crisis, in other words, is created by an attempt to exclude the decisionist element from the state, which is the only legitimate authority that can decide on this separation. By explicitly linking the sovereignty debates of voluntarist crisis with those of Weimar, Schmitt emphasises that the model for this sovereign is at all times descended from the voluntarist God of Ockham and, correspondingly, sovereign of Hobbes.

Schmitt, however, is interested in the ambiguous legacy of this voluntarism. If the human being is made 'in the image of God' when the wholly sovereign God, detached from human beings that no longer have a fixed teleological end, results in a sovereign individual. The 'self-legitimation' of Blumenberg's modernity is then the rationalistic answer to the question of the voluntarist crisis. The 'immanent rationalism' of the modern age is an answer to legitimate theological questions that cannot be answered by theology alone because God should not be arbitrary. The radical contingency of the voluntarist conception of God forces a scepticism about God and His relationship to the world that 'determines [a] new anthropology and [a] new 'science' of politics'.⁷⁷ The human being as a property-owning individual, with an unimpeded will, comes closest to reflecting this sovereign image of God. This new contingent relationship between God and

the extent that were no longer teleologically drawn to unity with Him, as we would be in a natural law theology

I want to emphasise here why Schmitt is so interested in the parallels between the voluntarist crisis and Weimar: the conception of God that arises in both, an absolutely omnipotent Being, is the intellectual ancestor of both liberalism and Schmitt's decisionism. The mistake, in Schmitt's mind, is in secularising this conception of God to the human being rather than to the state alone. This is most clearly shown in his treatise on Hobbes. The classical case of decisionist thinking first appears in the seventeenth century with Hobbes, writes, but it is here, in the very beginning of the political, that the voluntarist God is secularised as an anthropological claim. Hobbes's major error is in allowing the individual's private reason whether to believe or not to believe and to preserve his *intra pectus suum*. At the pinnacle of the sovereign power of the state, united with the theological in its decisionism, occurs this rupture of the otherwise so complete, so overpowering unity, the decisive point, concerning miracle and belief, that Hobbes evades. For Schmitt, this rupture, which is importantly a rejection of the either/or of decision, is caused by transposing the voluntarist conception of God onto humanity as well as the state. The presence of conscience in the world commits the ultimate sin of detracting from the omnipotence of God by declaring the individual to be sovereign in his or her own realm. As Ockham writes, a simple cognition of the divine nature in itself is impossible, we cannot have this kind of cognition in our present state. Schmitt, writing in 1923 in *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, notes that historically considered, privatization has its origin in religion, and religion's capacity to always and everywhere absorb and absolutise turns privacy itself into an absolute, in which the individual has a right against both God and the state that is antithetical to the workings of juristic authority. For Schmitt, this hitherto scarcely recognized correlation explains the sociological development of modern European society. I would argue that this scarcely recognised section of

Section Five: Transcendence in Political Form

This moment, the voluntarist crisis, is then

voluntarist faith in the decision. For Bonald, Schmitt, writes, "tradition offered the sole possibility of gaining the content that man was capable of accepting metaphysically, because the intellect of the individual was considered too weak and wretched to be able to recognise the truth by itself."⁹ Bonald, who wrote that he walked always between "being and nothingness" confronts Schmitt as a figure of fideist heroism, rejecting the rationalism of immanence for the "moral disjunctions" between "good and evil, God and the devil" in which a synthesis is to be rejected, and the subject is always faced with an "either/or" decision.¹⁰ Here we see Schmitt making the explicit claim that his decisionism is descended from the fideist contention that knowledge through rational analysis is impossible. The either/or exists in the sense of a life-and-death struggle that does not recognise a synthesis and a "high third."¹¹ The voluntarist crisis necessitates decision. In this very literal way, through both historic descent and the "metaphysics" of cognitive limitation, the sovereignty of God is as unknowable as the sovereign of the state.

It may be protested that this faith in the decision alone is a strangely immanent-sounding and indeed potentially subjective conception of sovereignty. We have already seen how the voluntarist crisis led to a severe and potentially solipsistic questioning of God in a world in which humanity was no longer teleologically destined to be united with the divine. Could it be then, that the transcendence-immanence distinction is simply a false one? Indeed, a rejection

a historical event, non-appropriable, non-occupiable singularity. It is the incarnation in the Virgin Mary.⁸³ In this, history has a "Marian image," a concrete historical specificity in the person of Christ whose birth is necessitated from the acceptance of the Virgin's response to God's request to become the Mother of God: "Let it be done unto me according to thy word," is the submission of the individual will to the sovereign decision which brings history into being. Schmitt is keen to contrast the mere personal belief in revelation (of a typically Protestant variety) with the assent to institutional decision in the Catholic Church which descends from this acceptance. Whether someone can be called a true Christian has nothing to do with the intensity of impatience with which he seeks to bind himself to God but rather with the path he takes. The path is determined by the law of God, that is, the law with which Christ admonished the tempter when he challenged Christ to make bread from stones.⁸⁵ "Intensity of impatience" is an immanent attaching of oneself to God, while "the law of God," issues from transcendence and has to be taken via the structures of mediation which present God's law to humanity.

For Schmitt, this distinction between immanence and transcendence is based in the priority of political form. As Meier notes, the *Ecce, ancilla Domini, fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum* [Behold the handmaid of the

inherent in the idea of representation in human in the deepest sense¹⁰⁴ and I hope that this dissertation has gone some way towards defining more precisely the relations within Schmitt's very own unorthodox trinity of the theological, the political, and the anthropological, which is so central to his work.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 33

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