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

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## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	3
<b>Introduction</b> .....	4
<b>Section One: The Theological-Political Problem</b> .....	6
<b>Section Two: Political Theology and History</b> .....	9
<b>Section Three: Faith in the Decision</b> .....	14
<b>Section Four: The Theological-Political Transition</b> .....	18
<b>Section Five: Transcendence in Political Form</b> .....	25
<b>Concluding Remarks</b> .....	29
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	31

## **Abstract**

This dissertation argues that the relationship between the concepts of the theological and political should be a central question of Schmitt scholarship, and that a neglect of the theological aspects of Schmitt's work is simultaneously a disservice to an analysis of his political thought. Indeed, the two cannot be separated. I have attempted to take Schmitt's theological concerns seriously, rather than as simply analogous qualifiers of other more substantive political concerns. As such I try to place Schmitt within a contemporary theological-political context, which includes both Weimar and the post-war debates with Hans Blumenberg, and attempts to understand what exactly Schmitt means when he says that there is a "metaphysical kernel of all politics." I separate Schmitt's secularisation theorem into two distinct claims: firstly, the specific theological-political transition period at the end of the Middle Ages, and then the subsequent claim that each era's politics are merely reflective of its metaphysical assumptions, concluding that the second is unjustifiable and that instead his 'metaphysics' should be understood as an anthropological claim. My task is to then understand how the secularisation theorem, understood as an analysis of the theoretical-political transition under theological nominalist voluntarism, interacts with Schmitt's anthropological claims for the political itself. The contention is that the voluntarist conception of God can, in Schmitt's view, be secularised either to the state or to the human being. This is a contrast between transcendence (which leads to a recognition of the need for a decision on the exception) and immanence (which denies the decision). The voluntarist crisis in theology then echoes a similar theological-political crisis in Weimar. I conclude by suggesting that the recognition of these crises' effect on Schmitt's thought should lead to a far greater interest in the theological roots of Schmitt's thinking in both the Medieval and Weimar periods.

## 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 exorcised by the end of the last century, which was of course to be “the end of history.”<sup>1</sup> 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 attempts to define their relationship were successful. The neglect of theology is a curious feature of contemporary political theory. Indeed, the idea that one can do *any* political theory without, in a very real sense, also conducting a theological study is an increasingly popular idea in contemporary theology. On this view, one shared by thinkers of the Radical Orthodoxy school among others, even the best political theory is simply bad theology, even heresy. Although not personally convinced by these alarming suggestions I am interested by their implications, and I hope that by pointing to the increasingly obscured line between what have often been thought of as two distinct disciplines I can justify a more in-depth focus on the theological roots of Schmitt’s political thought, which I suggest is essential for a proper understanding of his intentions.

This dissertation will ask a single question: how far is Schmitt’s thought – particularly the concepts of the political and, with it, the decision – dependent upon his theological premises? The central argument will be that there is a fundamental tension in Schmitt’s work, which is essentially a recognition that voluntarist theology leads to a radical metaphysical scepticism, the results of which are either self-legitimation or decisionism. In this way, Schmitt’s theory of sovereignty shares a common theological ancestor with the liberalism and legal positivism

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<sup>1</sup> Fukuyama, F., 1992 (2012), *The End of History and the Last Man*, (London: Penguin)

that he opposes, hence his distinguishing emphasis on the essential *humanity* underlying his political theory.

I would also like to make clear that I am convinced of a relatively stable conception of political theology throughout Schmitt's work, aside from the change from genealogy to analogy which is addressed below. I do not agree with those who suggest radical changes of opinion on Schmitt's part either in the Weimar or post-war periods. Throughout this dissertation I draw on lesser known works from 1917 through to 1970 in an attempt to illustrate this. Terminologically, it should be noted that Schmitt tends to use the concepts of theology and metaphysics interchangeably, though generally 'metaphysics' tends to refer to a realm beyond cognitive understanding whilst theology is *both* this *and* a reference to the religious study of the nature of God. Finally, I have often abbreviated the titles of the texts *Political Theology* and *Political Theology II* to *PT* and *PTII* when appropriate.

This dissertation will be structured in five sections. In section one I will briefly explore the context of Weimar, and in particular the emphasis at that time being placed on 'the theologico-political question'. In section two I explore Schmitt's secularisation theorem and the analogy/genealogy debate. In section three I argue for a Schmittian 'materialist metaphysics' which understands 'theology' as analogous to the limitations of human cognition. In section four I explore the similarities between the voluntarist crisis in Medieval theology and the theology of the Weimar period. In the fifth and final section I argue that these crises necessitate a choice between immanence and transcendence, which forces us to consider questions of political form. I then conclude.

## 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 'crisis' itself which, in its original Greek, has the meaning of a discrimination or separation that leads to judgement. Crisis and decision are intimately related concepts: the crisis, in the medical works of Galen and Hippocrates, is the point at which the patient can either recover or die.<sup>2</sup>

The context I wish to locate Schmitt within is well-known in the study of theology but far less so in political theory. This is the conservative contention, prevalent in Weimar, that the question of sovereignty within the state was merely a sub-category within the larger question of the human being's relation to the sovereignty of God. The public-private distinction, on this reading, arose from a potentially more complex debate that raged at the time about the legitimacy not just of specific norms and their right relation to the state but, as Hans Blumenberg put it, of the entire "modern age" itself.<sup>3</sup> As Schmitt would reference in *Political Theology*, this was a question of genealogical derivation as much as analogical similarity; if the 'modern age', including the political philosophical foundations of that modernity, are in some literal way illegitimate, in the sense of being based on metaphysical assumptions that they ostensibly reject, then the legal and political norms of the modern state might not just be questionable but actively opposed to an alternative form of legitimate governance.

The question of the legitimacy of modernity is also one of the legitimacy of philosophy, and of its political philosophical variant. Arguably it is the point at which the theologian asks *what* God is, as Heinrich Meier has noted,<sup>4</sup> that he or she turns away from revelation and towards a rationalist philosophy that begins from a fundamental scepticism. In reading Schmitt in this context, it is important to remember that these questions of the legitimacy both of philosophy and of politics were constantly being framed as *fundamentally theological* within Weimar. Constitutional crises were attacked from the right as being borne out of a confused theological-political debate. Legal theorist Karl Larenz, a figure who had a similarly ambiguous

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<sup>2</sup> Brown, P., 2017, 'The Sons Destined to Murder Their Father: Crisis in Interwar Germany,' in M. Sharpe, R. Jeffs, & J. Reynolds (eds.), *100 Years of European Philosophy Since the Great War*, (Springer), p. 77

<sup>3</sup> Blumenberg, H., 1966 (1983), *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, transl. R.M. Wallace, (Boston: MIT Press)

<sup>4</sup> Meier, H., 1994 (1998), *The Lesson of Carl Schmitt*, transl. M. Brainard, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), p. 70

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.”<sup>5</sup> 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”<sup>6</sup> was *the* crisis of central importance in Weimarer-era political theory.

This debate is most clear in the much later dialogue that Schmitt had with philosopher Hans Blumenberg, who is a key figure in this dissertation. Blumenberg (1920-1996) published his most important and influential work *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* in 1966 arguing for various theses, the most important of which was that contemporary concepts of progress were *not* descended from Christian theology. In this sense his view appears to be as oppositional as possible with the Schmittian secularisation theorem. As the title of his work suggests, Blumenberg’s work was concerned with how the shift from the categories of the theological to the political (which he recounts in great historical depth) did not mean that the ‘modern age’ (i.e. the time period which succeeded the Middle Ages, though particularly the world of the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century onwards) was somehow illegitimate.

The most pertinent parts of Blumenberg’s work for us are the places where he confronts Schmitt directly; as Bielik-Robson notes, in Blumenberg’s view Schmitt doesn’t appreciate that modernity is an epoch of its own, “not just a bastardised or secularised version of the previous one, which needs to call upon the hereditary justification.”<sup>7</sup> This rejection of the hereditary, or genealogical, justification of the modern age is also an explicit (and properly Humean) rejection of a Thomistic ‘substance’ which takes on different accidents throughout history:

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<sup>5</sup> Larenz, K., 1931, *Rechts und Staatsphilosophie der Gegenwart*, (Berlin: Junker und Dunnhaupt), found in L.V. Kaplan & R. Koshar (eds.), *The Weimar Moment: Liberalism, Political Theology, and Law*, (Plymouth: Lexington), p. 11

<sup>6</sup> Meier, H., 2006, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, transl. M. Brainard, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 3

<sup>7</sup> Bielik-Robson, A., 2016, ‘Beyond Sovereignty: Overcoming Modern Nominalist Cryptotheology’, *Journal for Cultural Research*, p. 2

“secularisation cannot be the result of a withdrawal of substance,”<sup>8</sup> he writes, it is instead “a continuation of problems rather than of solutions, of questions rather than of answers.”<sup>9</sup> In this sense, ‘legitimacy’ is not a hereditary category associated with tradition or lineage of underlying metaphysics, but precisely of the *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 most *theologically* rational answer to the problem of God’s sovereignty. Blumenberg’s argument is that theology fails to answer this question satisfactorily and where the Church fails, an immanent rationalism must take over.

On this view, Schmitt’s ‘political theology’ as a political question – i.e. the foundation of legal order within the state – was and is simultaneously a question about the nature and attributes of God because of the potentially delegitimising turn from metaphysics to politics. The question of the legitimating function of theology in the concept ‘political theology’ is therefore essential to reaching a proper understanding of political sovereignty in the modern state. We cannot hope to understand the one without properly investigating the other.

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<sup>8</sup> Blumenberg, H., 1966 (1983), p. 95

<sup>9</sup> Wallace, R.M., Translators Introduction to Blumenberg, H., 1966 (1983), p. xviii

## Section Two: Political Theology 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 *always* related to the debate surrounding the sovereignty of God. Surely, they will argue, one must be able to do Schmittian political theory without becoming bogged down in what is, to all intents and purposes, an elaborate and complex metaphor? This is indeed a strong criticism and in this section I shall attempt to uncover the logic that leads Schmitt to reject it.

Schmitt's misleading statement that "the political is the total,"<sup>10</sup> from the preface to the 1934 edition of *Political Theology* appears to have convinced many readers that the 'theology' in his thought is merely a slight modifier of that which is political. It is of course true that the concept of the political is absolutely fundamental to his work, and the key concepts of friend and enemy, and of the decision, arise from its careful study. But a correct understanding of the political should lead us to a more precise understanding of its relation to that which is theological, and certainly not a dismissal of the theological altogether. At this point a definition of our terms is necessary.

For Schmitt, the category of the political is present in any situation in which a group defines itself in existential antagonism towards another. This is the distinction between friend and enemy. Irreconcilable public enmity is the fundamental condition of the political situation, it is a division of the "utmost degree of intensity ... of an association or dissociation,"<sup>11</sup> which isn't based on any essential substantive distinction. Instead, the political is always contingent upon prevailing circumstance; it is not dependent on a difference of substance but is rather an *antecedent* of form. As Schmitt puts it, "the concept of the state presupposes the concept of the political;"<sup>12</sup> states cannot exist, with defined boundaries within which certain norms prevail, without the collectivisation and homogenisation of the friend-enemy distinction.

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<sup>10</sup> Schmitt, C., 1934 (2005), Preface to *Political Theology*, transl. G. Schwab, (Boston: MIT Press), p. 2

<sup>11</sup> Schmitt, C., 1932, (2007), *The Concept of the Political*, transl. G. Schwab, (University of Chicago Press, Chicago), p. 26

<sup>12</sup> Schmitt, C., 1932 (2007), p. 19

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.”<sup>13</sup> “As long as a people have the will to political existence,” Schmitt writes, they “are superior to every formation and normative framework.”<sup>14</sup> Schmitt is suspicious of norms, as they appear to beg the question of validation. Who guarantees or upholds law by deciding on exceptional circumstances in which law must be suspended? That entity is the sovereign. “Sovereign is he who decides on the exception,”<sup>15</sup> writes Schmitt, the exception being a state of emergency, whose details can never be foreknown; as Schmitt writes: “the precondition as well as the content of jurisdictional competence in such a case must necessarily be unlimited.”<sup>16</sup>

Anyone coming to these concepts in Schmitt’s work with the aim of analysing the relationship between theology and politics will quickly come up against the difficulty of defining ‘political theology’ itself. One can understand it both as a declarative statement of historical genealogical or analogical similarity *and* as a way of doing political theory. Schmitt writes that “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development—in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state ... but also because of their systematic structure.”<sup>17</sup> Because of this claimed lineage, political theology is also a practice in the sociology of concepts, ‘demythologising’ the self-asserted mythos of liberal modernity.

Schmitt’s claim appears to be that the concepts of the decision and of the sovereign are derived from previous theological conceptions of God’s sovereignty: “the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver.”<sup>18</sup> In every age the conception of the sovereign, and of law, mirrors the prevailing theology and metaphysics. So, for example, “the idea of the modern constitutional state triumphed together with deism, a theology and metaphysics that banished the miracle from the world.”<sup>19</sup> The exception, the emergency state of affairs that is declared by the sovereign, is in this way analogous to the miracle; by extirpating the very conception of the

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<sup>13</sup> Schmitt, C., 1928 (2008), *Constitutional Theory*, transl. J. Seitzer, (Duke University Press, London), p. 132

<sup>14</sup> Schmitt, C., 1928 (2008), p. 131

<sup>15</sup> Schmitt, C., 1934 (2005), p. 5

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p. 36

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p. 36

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p. 36

miraculous from theological discourse it becomes impossible to imagine the legal order as underpinned by moments of jurisprudential suspension of law.

There is an ongoing debate in the literature as to what extent this idea of political theology is truly genealogical (i.e. brought about by historical lineage) or is instead to be read as analogy. As I have suggested above, criticisms of Schmitt's genealogy appear aimed at the more explicitly theological readings of his work. After all, it is claimed, if Schmitt didn't truly believe his genealogical theorem then any theology that he claims to draw upon is merely polemical and thus of little consequence for his actual aim which was to create a substantive secular legal and political theory. The criticism is usually framed as a question about the relationship between the theological and the political. *How can the influence of theology, or metaphysics, on the political be genealogical in each era? And if it is not, and it is simply analogy, then surely the 'theological' aspects of his work are mere metaphor, and are only useful insofar as they illuminate his (now totally secular) political theory?* Whilst agreeing that Schmitt's genealogical claim is potentially problematic, I do not think this view is valid. I will address each of these questions in turn.

To understand Schmitt's reasoning here I believe it is important to make a distinction between two Schmittian strategies. I claim that political theology addresses two separate questions: *firstly, the historical relationship between theology and politics; and secondly, the metaphorical registers which best reflect the realities of human nature as it exists in each historical period in its relationship with the state.* The vast majority of the confusion around Schmitt's aims arises from a reluctance to untangle these two questions, which are purposefully confused by Schmitt for polemical effect.

As De Vries and Sullivan have declared, political theology simply amounts to "strategically re-theologising the political, binding its central concepts backward to their supposedly religious origins."<sup>20</sup> This criticism was most forcefully argued by Hans Blumenberg in his 1966 work *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, to which Schmitt responded in the postscript to *Political Theology II*. Blumenberg argues that the secularisation theorem can't be as straightforward as Schmitt suggests; how could, for example, the thinkers of the Counter-Enlightenment such as

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<sup>20</sup> De Vries, H. & Sullivan, L. E., 2006, *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, (New York: Fordham University Press), p. 47

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 theological attribute of omnipotence, then this now relates only to the coordination, within a systematic context, of positions that are distinguished by the fact that they both carry the universal quantifier ‘all power.’”<sup>21</sup> “Analogies, after all,” Blumenberg concludes, “are precisely not transformations.”<sup>22</sup> This is a strong criticism.

Schmitt’s supposed genealogical mirroring in each age is, I believe, rather straightforwardly false. Perhaps ironically given Schmitt’s either/or decisionism it seems quite clear that between *Political Theology* in 1922 and *Political Theology II* in 1970, Schmitt takes on board Blumenberg’s (as well as others’) criticism and emphasises the analogous connections between the theological and the political. *PTII* appears to a large extent to abandon the claims of its predecessor that the secularisation theorem has a genealogical basis *in each time period*. In a footnote, Schmitt writes: “everything I have said on the topic of political theology is statements of a jurist upon the obvious theoretical and practical *legal structural resemblance* between theological and juridical concepts”<sup>23</sup> (emphasis added). Indeed, *PTII* as a whole is notable for its extended concentration on theology (and a rather explicit wading into complex theological debates) *and* for its move from genealogy (which isn’t mentioned at all) to an analogic and structural similarity that washes its hands of a strict ‘scientific’ conceptual lineage. In other words, by the time of *PTII* Schmitt is willing to concede that the theological-political question *may* well not have a genuine genealogical answer. By 1970, political theology involves a complex and ever-moving polymorphous realm of analogies and similarities in which politics and theology appear to be far more symbiotically related, and the direction of travel is no longer unidirectional. So why concentrate on the theology in this historical relationship to the extent that he does? The answer lies in the Blumenberg-Schmitt debate. Blumenberg’s criticism is part of an attempt to justify the trans-historical legitimacy of the modern age against its declinist critics, or as Schmitt writes “for Blumenberg ‘secularisation is a category of historical injustice.’”<sup>24</sup> By this he means that the concept of God that Schmitt works with, a totally

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<sup>21</sup> Blumenberg, H., 1966 (1983), p. 94

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, p. 93

<sup>23</sup> Schmitt, C., 1970 (2008), *Political Theology II: The Myth of the Closure of Any Political Theology*, transl. M. Hoelzl & G. Ward, (London: Polity Press), p. 148

<sup>24</sup> Schmitt, C., 1970 (2008), p. 118

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],”<sup>25</sup> demanded either total assent or dissent.

Schmitt thinks this historical period so important he returns to it regularly in *PTII*. Schmitt’s aim here is to delegitimise the modern era through the analysis of the theological-political question in the specific period of the Middle Ages by giving an historical explanation of legal decisionism. As *Schmitz* writes, “he understands the redeployment [of theological concepts in the state] as making possible a realization of legal ideas, and hence of decisions;”<sup>26</sup> the ‘modern age’ is therefore the inheritor of this decisionism in a concrete and historical sense. The transfer of decision from the Church to the state *in this specific historical period*, and on into the seventeenth century, with the corresponding negation of the role of dogma and heresy, allows the idea of friend and enemy (the political), as an essential and antecedent distinction to come into being. But crucially the political was *already* metaphysical at its birth. It is Schmitt’s contention that the Medieval period gave rise to questions that secular political self-legitimation could not and still cannot answer. This redeployment (*umbesetzung*) argument is *to be considered separately* from the previously rejected idea that each historical period is only reflective of its metaphysical presuppositions. This is a macro-historical interpretation of the *fact* of the decline of the theological and the rise of the political at the end of the Medieval period. Schmitt primary aim is to declare this move of the decision from the Church to the state as a transition of historical significance as it gives rise to the necessity of political decision.

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p. 39

<sup>26</sup> Schmitz, A., 2017, ‘Legitimacy of the Modern Age?’ In J. Meierhenrich & O. Simons (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook to Carl Schmitt*, (Oxford: OUP), p. 711

### 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 the realities of human nature as it exists in each historical period in 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."<sup>27</sup> 'Absolute metaphors' exist in a non-analytical realm and are the attempt of human reason to capture a reality which resists categorisation. A *Telos* editorial from 2012 describes Blumenberg's project in this work as explaining philosophy's dependence on "nonconceptuality" and a recognition that "fundamental questions of technology, anthropology, contingency, and skepticism share concentric space with metaphor, rhetoric, and myth."<sup>28</sup> This is an important concession.

But Schmitz's argument doesn't go far enough. As stated above, my contention is that much of Schmitt's political theology is about searching for the metaphorical registers which best reflect the realities of human nature as it exists in each historical period in its relationship with the state. This 'human nature' is bound up with a materialist emphasis on a 'faith' which is analogous to the limits of human reason. My argument here is that against the self-legitimising reason of the modern age, Schmitt opposes his own conception of the fundamental irrationality of human nature which finds a ready metaphor in theology. Ironically there is a wonderful similarity between the views of Schmitt and Blumenberg on this point. For Schmitt, there is a "metaphysical kernel of all politics,"<sup>29</sup> that is unavoidable. Leo Strauss, in his analysis of *The Concept of the Political*, asks why the possibility of conflict can never be eliminated; the answer is because "the political is a basic characteristic of human life; politics in this sense is destiny; therefore man cannot escape politics."<sup>30</sup> The result of this, which is central to Schmitt's

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<sup>27</sup> Schmitz, A., 2017, p. 710

<sup>28</sup> Fleming, P., Campe, R., & Wetters, K. (eds.), 2012, Editorial, *Telos 158: Hans Blumenberg*, Spring

<sup>29</sup> Schmitt, C., 1934 (2005), p. 51

<sup>30</sup> Strauss, L., 'Notes on Carl Schmitt, The Concept of the Political', in Schmitt, C., 1932 (2010), p. 110

concept of the human being, is “that man ceases to be human when he ceases to be political.”<sup>31</sup> The political, says, Strauss “is necessary because it is given in human nature.”<sup>32</sup>

Schmitt firmly believes that all political ideas can be classified “according to their anthropology”<sup>33</sup> and that “all genuinely political theories presuppose man to be evil.”<sup>34</sup> 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.”<sup>35</sup> 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 appearances”<sup>36</sup> (emphasis added). This little-commented on passage can be a key for us, opening up Schmitt’s metaphysical speculations as being a fundamental part of the project of political theology itself. This is a heady mix of anthropology and ‘metaphysics’ with the political and its fundamental basis in enmity towards the other. Thus, Schmitt can write of an anthropological confession of faith in fundamental in-group out-group hostility without simultaneously using ‘theology’ in its usual genuinely metaphysical sense. Metaphysics, for Schmitt, is here as much a materialist conception as the political itself.

To emphasise this, Schmitt writes that the problem of Blumenberg’s work is one of the foundation of human knowledge. He quotes Blumenberg as saying that “knowledge does not need any justification, it justifies itself; it is not the gift of God and is not bound by enlightenment or insights through grace. Rather, it rests upon its own evidence, which neither God nor man can ignore.”<sup>37</sup> Schmitt’s reply is predictably dismissive: “autism is inherent in this argument. Its immanence, directed polemically against a theological transcendence, is

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 110

<sup>32</sup> Ibid p. 111

<sup>33</sup> Schmitt, C., 1932 (2010), p. 58

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 61

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 59

<sup>36</sup> Schmitt, C., 1970 (2008), pp. 57-8

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. 120

nothing but self-empowerment.”<sup>38</sup> 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 ‘self,’ a so-called auto-composition.”<sup>39</sup> 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.”<sup>40</sup> 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.”<sup>41</sup> 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.”<sup>42</sup> 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*”<sup>43</sup> 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.”<sup>44</sup> This is worth repeating again: the *complexio oppositorum*, a complex of opposites based ultimately in faith (though Schmitt calls this a specific “Catholic rationalism”<sup>45</sup> due to its being based in the logic of the decision)

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p. 120

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p. 34

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p. 129

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p. 34

<sup>42</sup> Rae, G., 2016, The Theology Of Carl Schmitt’s Political Theology, *Political Theology*, 17(6), p. 564

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

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p. 8

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, p. 14

“morally encompasses the psychological and sociological nature of man.”<sup>46</sup> 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.”<sup>47</sup>

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 self-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”<sup>48</sup> whose most fundamental relationship with the sovereign is always one of metaphysical assent to authority against an immanent self-assertion.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p. 13

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p. 17

<sup>48</sup> Schmitt, C., 1970 (2008), p. 115

## Section Four: The Theological-Political Transition

There are, then, two strategies at work in Schmitt. Firstly, the basic historical observation that the secular state did, in a quite specific way, inherit the power of decision from the Church (this is purposefully confused with the secularisation theorem regarding each historical period which is, in reality, a separate contention); and secondly, Schmitt's strategy of contrasting immanence with transcendence, the transcendent being a recognition of the importance of the metaphysical in relation to the political decision. This metaphysics is paradoxically based in the purely material limitations of human cognition and can explain Schmitt's use of structural analogies between the theological and the political in each historical period.

At the heart of this debate we seem to have two views with which Schmitt disagrees. Firstly, Blumenberg's argument, summarised by John Milbank as stating that secular discourse simply "borrows inherently inappropriate modes of expression from religion as the only discourse to hand,"<sup>49</sup> thereby delegitimising the self-affirming character of contemporary ideologies. And secondly, a more explicitly theological argument stating that secular discourse "is actually constituted in its secularity by 'heresy' in relation to orthodox Christianity."<sup>50</sup> Of course, he is much more sympathetic to the second than to the first, but his argument is by no means based upon a genuine revelation from God. Schmitt's assessment of the legitimating character of the theological decision leads him to create binary oppositions between concepts: "the spiritual-temporal, this world and the hereafter, transcendence-immanence."<sup>51</sup> Schmitt's thought constantly sets up metaphysics, theology, and the human being on one side versus 'rationality', economic-technical thinking, positivism, and technology on the other.

There is something essentially human in this vision, which isn't a simple "metaphysics of death,"<sup>52</sup> as Richard Wolin has claimed. Political theology, looked at in this light, appears to be making claims about the human being which have direct political implications. Of course, the context of Weimar is essential for understanding why this might be. The *Existenzphilosophie* of the late 1920s, a Nietzschean-influenced declinist conception of the history of Western philosophy, was incredibly influential on the political right. Some critics

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<sup>49</sup> Milbank, J., 1990 (2006), *Theology and Social Theory*, (Oxford: Blackwell), p. 3

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, p. 3

<sup>51</sup> Schmitt, C., 1970 (2008), p. 44

<sup>52</sup> Wolin, R., 1990, 'Carl Schmitt, Political Existentialism, and the Total State', *Theory and Society*, 19(4), p. 395

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 "brute facticity"<sup>53</sup> in Schmitt which revels in an aristocratic ecstasy of "storm" and "steel."<sup>54</sup> Wolin recognises that the "power of decision is grounded in an insight superior to the subaltern capacities of human ratiocination"<sup>55</sup> 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 that Schmitt claims were transformed into secular conceptions of sovereignty. This is a hugely overlooked topic in political theoretical interpretations of Schmitt. I contend that this theological underpinning is provided by the crisis that leads to the original redeployment of the theological into the political at the end of the Middle Ages: nominalist voluntarism. Political theologies of various types (and accounts of the theological-political question) have had a difficult relationship with nominalism and voluntarism over the past century. Radical Orthodoxy has practically made Duns Scotus and William of Ockham, prime movers of a nominalist theological moment, *persona non grata* within contemporary theological debate, blaming them (and particularly Duns Scotus) for the rise of liberalism and the collapse of theological metaphysical assumptions.

To be brief, nominalism, in the sense that I am referring to, is the philosophical contention that there are no abstract universals. The nominalist position leads to a question which Schmitt asks in *On the Three Types of Juristic Thought*,<sup>56</sup> and that is also asked by Meier: "does God want the good because it is good or is the good good because God wants it?"<sup>57</sup> The connection to decisionism should be clear. For the nominalists, particularly William of Ockham (1287-1347), God must be at all times free to determine His action in the world unconstrained by abstract

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<sup>53</sup> Wolin, R., 1990, p. 394

<sup>54</sup> Junger, E., 1920 (2004), *Storm of Steel*, transl. M. Hoffman, (London: Penguin)

<sup>55</sup> Wolin, R., 1990, p. 397

<sup>56</sup> Schmitt, C., 1934 (2004), *On The Three Types of Juristic Thought*, transl. J. Bendersky, (London: Prager), p. 60

<sup>57</sup> Meier, H., 1994 (1998). 92

inviolable categories. This understanding of God leads to voluntarism which, very simply, is the idea that ‘the good’ is whatever God says it is. This is also known as divine command theory. There is no universal category of the good (and therefore of evil), of the true, or of the beautiful — there is simply a totalising, sovereign will. The difficulty with this view, which may be immediately clear, is that all existence is dependent upon arbitrary decision.

Ockham was reacting against the Averroist Aristotelians and the natural theology of Aquinas, both of whom he thought “locked God within a rationalist box,”<sup>58</sup> to quote the philosopher Edward Feser. The idea that discrete objects needed to share in any necessary universality was an unhelpful and illogical multiplication, according to Ockham, but this also meant that each object was singular and distinct, and its telos unconnected to others that may be of its kind. The ultimate purpose of each object was therefore defined solely by the Sovereign will. As Gillespie writes, on this view “the world to its very core is contingent and governed only by the necessity that God momentarily imparts to it. There thus are no universals, no species or genera. There are likewise no intrinsic ends for individuals that arise out of and correspond to the essence of their species.”<sup>59</sup> And, similarly, this gives God total control over morality to an extent previously considered blasphemous; Duns Scotus writes that killing could be seen as morally good “if God should revoke this precept, do not kill.”<sup>60</sup> Note that in this decisionist voluntarism we see the antecedent distinction of the political written in theological language. If, as Schmitt says, the friend-enemy distinction is an “antithesis [known] independently of other antitheses” then it remains totally unattached to apparently universal categories such as “the morally evil, aesthetically ugly, or economically damaging”<sup>61</sup> which may exist beforehand.

The effect of this development on Medieval theology was dramatic and resulted in a crisis of thinking on the sovereignty and nature of God. As Blumenberg wrote, the nominalist moment was at the centre of the “crisis-laden dissolution of the Middle Ages;” it was above all a crisis of the “systematic relations in the metaphysical triangle: man, God, world.”<sup>62</sup> If God’s power was totalising and apparently arbitrary, then any constancy and universality gifted as attributes of the world necessarily detracted from His power. This sets the human being up in opposition

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<sup>58</sup> Feser, E., ‘Razor Boy’, in the *Edward Feser Blog*, <http://edwardfeser.blogspot.com/2011/03/razor-boy.html> (accessed: 20/08/2018)

<sup>59</sup> Gillespie, M.A., 1994, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), p. 17

<sup>60</sup> Duns Scotus, 1997, *Duns Scotus on the Will and Morality*, transl. A.B. Wolter, OFM, (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press), P. 306

<sup>61</sup> Schmitt, C., 1932 (2010), p. 27

<sup>62</sup> Blumenberg, 1966 (1983), p. 484

to God — sovereignty is not, and can never be, plural. If God’s relationship to ‘the good’ is one of totalising decision alone, this throws into doubt ideas about God that involve an inherent goodness. This is the *potentia absoluta* as opposed to the *potentia ordinata*, the former being the absolute power of God which, as John Milbank points out,<sup>63</sup> finds its political apotheosis in Hobbes’ terrifying and all-powerful Leviathan: “The right of Nature, whereby God reigneth over men, and punishes those that break his Lawes, is to be derived, not from his creating them, as if he required obedience as of gratitude for his benefits; but from his Irresistible Power.”<sup>64</sup>

The parallels between this conception of God and the decisionism of Schmitt are obvious, though there has been remarkably little academic work conducted into the impact of this voluntarist theology on Schmitt’s thinking. What is crucial for us is Schmitt’s explicit linking of this period to the crisis of Weimar, which is rarely, if ever, commented upon in the literature. As Tanner writes, “the Weimar constitution brought for Protestantism – for which no organisational or personnel changes at the church level had taken place without state authorisation since the Reformation – the separation of church and state, the legal and political end of the alliance between ‘throne and altar.’”<sup>65</sup> Schmitt writes that the “cooperation and mutual recognition” between church and state that had characterised the last four hundred years of German history had “vanished” in 1919, “initiating crisis” for “German Protestantism.”<sup>66</sup> Suddenly, the two *societas perfectae* – church and state – which had existed in as close a parallel as possible, had been “shattered” by a liberal constitution which many Protestant theologians rejected as being an inadequate “means of politically dealing with a pluralistic culture.”<sup>67</sup> Schmitt makes this explicit, writing that “Protestant theologians realised the crisis of religion, church, culture, and state, and, finally, saw that critique is the essence of Protestantism.”<sup>68</sup>

The crisis in Weimar’s Protestant theology is crucial for Schmitt as he is interested in contrasting an essentially immanent Protestantism, *which dissolves political form*, with a transcendent Catholic Church that remained “absolutely unaffected by this crisis during the

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<sup>63</sup> Milbank, J., 1990 (2006), p. 16

<sup>64</sup> Hobbes, T., 1651 (1996), *Leviathan: Revised Student Edition*, ed. R. Tuck, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 246

<sup>65</sup> Tanner, K., 2012, ‘Protestant Revolt Against Modernity’ in L.V. Kaplan & R. Koshar (eds.), *The Weimar Moment: Liberalism, Political Theology, and Law*, (Plymouth: Lexington), p. 5

<sup>66</sup> Schmitt, C., 1970 (2008), p. 39

<sup>67</sup> Tanner, K., 2012, p. 5

<sup>68</sup> Schmitt, C., 1970 (2008), p. 40

entire Weimar period”<sup>69</sup> because of a political form that privileged the decision and a fideist “Catholic rationalism.”<sup>70</sup> 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 also meant a corresponding suppression of the period of voluntarist crisis, which I argue is crucial for understanding the conceptualisation of the political in this period.

Above all, these *theological* debates gripping Weimar were about legitimacy as a derived secular conception of God’s *sovereignty*. The theologians of Weimar were interested in “preserv[ing] the primacy of God’s concrete command in the world”<sup>71</sup> as a way to claim the realm of the political for the theological. This sense of sovereignty as central to a theological project that had pointed criticisms to make of political realities crossed denominational divides of all kinds, both intra-Protestant and Protestant-Catholic. The most well-known of these theologians is Karl Barth, whose work became representative of the school known as ‘theology of crisis’. Despite the similarities between the work of Barth and Schmitt, very little has been written directly comparing their thought. The “Protestant theologians” that Schmitt refers to include Barth, the most important of all, for whom the ‘crisis’ of Weimar was one of the right relation between God and humanity: “one *cannot* speak of God simply by speaking of man in a loud voice... There is no faculty in man through which revelation can be apprehended.”<sup>72</sup> Indeed, Schmitt was well aware of Barth’s work on the utter unknowability of God. Koshar writes in passing that “Schmitt’s thinking in the 1920s evolved with Barth’s Romans commentary always in sight,”<sup>73</sup> that text being a forceful declaration of the absolute omnipotence of God.

Barth’s God is radically other from humanity and, in a true Calvinist sense, is totally and utterly sovereign. This emphasis on the sovereignty of God wasn’t just detached metaphysical speculation, Barth and other theological thinkers were interested in the role of the Church in the world, and the role of the Church in relation to the state especially. Ecclesiological emphasis (questions around what *form* the Church should take) were simply at the more explicitly theological end of the public-private separation debate. Koshar writes that “Barth’s theology

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<sup>69</sup> Schmitt, C., 1970 (2008), p. 39

<sup>70</sup> Schmitt, C., 1923 (1996), p. 14

<sup>71</sup> Koshar, R., 2008, ‘Where is Karl Barth in Modern European History?’, *Modern Intellectual History*, 5(2), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 347

<sup>72</sup> Barth, K., 1928, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, found in Morgan, D., 2010, *The SPCK Introduction to Karl Barth*, (London: SPCK Publishing), p. 31

<sup>73</sup> Koshar, R., 2008, p. 355

contributed to a ‘demythologisation’ of liberal secularity along with the role Christianity played within it.”<sup>74</sup> ‘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 a few months after what Scholder called “the summer of political theology,”<sup>75</sup> 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 decisionist form 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.”<sup>76</sup> 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, the 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’ then 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.”<sup>77</sup> 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 humanity is modelled on a contract — God is separated from humanity to

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<sup>74</sup> Koshar, R., 2012, ‘Demythologising the Secular’, in L.V. Kaplan & R. Koshar (eds.), *The Weimar Moment: Liberalism, Political Theology, and Law*, (Plymouth: Lexington), p. 315

<sup>75</sup> Scholder, K., 1977 (1987), *The Churches and the Third Reich*, transl. J. Bowden, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), p. 234

<sup>76</sup> Schmitt, C., 1970 (2008), pp. 39-40

<sup>77</sup> Milbank, J., 1990 (2006), p. 16

the extent that we are 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 "classic case of decisionist thinking first appears in the seventeenth century with Hobbes,"<sup>78</sup> he writes, but it is here, in the very beginning of the political, that the voluntarist God is secularised *as an anthropological claim*. Hobbes' major error is in allowing "the individual's private reason whether to believe or not to believe and to preserve his own *judicium* in his heart, *intra pectus suum*."<sup>79</sup> 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."<sup>80</sup> 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."<sup>81</sup> Schmitt, writing in 1923's *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"<sup>82</sup> 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."<sup>83</sup> I would argue that this scarcely recognised section of a lesser-known work holds the key to opening up Schmitt's understanding of the relation between theology and the political.

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<sup>78</sup> Schmitt, C., 1934 (2004), p. 61

<sup>79</sup> Schmitt, C., 1938 (1996), *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, transl. Schwab, G. & Hilfstein, E., (Greenwood Press, Westport), p. 56

<sup>80</sup> Schmitt, C., 1938 (1996), p. 55-56

<sup>81</sup> Ockham, 1991, *Quodlibetal Questions*, transl. A.J., Freddoso & F.E. Kelly, (New Haven: Yale University Press), pp. 103-4

<sup>82</sup> Schmitt, C., 1923 (1996), p. 28

<sup>83</sup> Schmitt, C., 1923 (1996), p. 28

## Section Five: Transcendence in Political Form

This moment, the voluntarist crisis, is then central to the debate between Schmitt and Blumenberg on the viability of a political theology. Blumenberg situates his own thought contrary to this voluntarist God due to a concern for his own conception of the self-legitimising human being. Schmitt, by contrast, embraces this voluntarism as that which gives the analogous structure of the decision to the political, grounds the political in its genealogical derivation from theology, and, as we will see, understands the human being's utter powerlessness before both God and the sovereign. In this final section I will follow Schmitt's demarcation of the immanent-transcendent divide to its conclusion: the priority of political form.

When confronted with this voluntarism, Schmitt essentially declares two possible responses: a totalising acceptance or an utterly atheistic rejection. On the one side of this is the all-powerful sovereign, and on the other the all-powerful 'self'-prefixed individual, isolated from his or her community and, as in his 1917 short story *Die Buribunken*, turned into a mechanism which is mirrored in the "*machina machinarum*"<sup>84</sup> of the state.

Chapter Four of *Political Theology* draws an intellectual history of those political thinkers who also depended on this decisionism. He makes an explicit link between the priority they give to the omnipotence of God and the fideist aspects of their political philosophies. As Amesbury writes, "'fideism' is the name given to that school of thought... which answers that faith is in some sense independent of, if not outright adversarial toward, reason."<sup>85</sup> Schmitt defends Louis de Bonald, the counterrevolutionary political theorist whom Schmitt calls the "founder of traditionalism."<sup>86</sup> There is a fideist element to Bonald's work, Schmitt argues (and indeed endorses), that contrasts with the internally-oriented philosophy of Hegel or "Schelling's philosophy of nature."<sup>87</sup> Here we see the most explicit attempt by Schmitt to contrast "conceptions of transcendence" to those of an "immanence-panteism or a positivist indifference toward any metaphysics."<sup>88</sup> This is the historical ancestor of the Schmitt-Blumenberg debate, with Schmitt firmly prefiguring his coming down on the side of a

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<sup>84</sup> Schmitt, C., 1938 (1996), p. 34

<sup>85</sup> Amesbury, R., 2017, 'Fideism', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, E.N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/fideism/>

<sup>86</sup> Schmitt, C., 1934 (2005), p. 54

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, p. 54

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, p. 50

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.”<sup>89</sup> 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.<sup>90</sup> 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 ‘higher third.’”<sup>91</sup> 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 of reason could be seen as a far more ‘immanent’ move on Schmitt’s part — if transcendence simply means relinquishing responsibility as a rational individual then the distinction seems to be more semantic than substantive. These protests are valid but misguided. Some commentators, such as Croce and Salvatore have suggested<sup>92</sup> that Schmitt’s recognition of this problem leads him to develop an institutionalist juristic conception against his pure decisionism in 1934’s *Three Types of Juristic Thought*. I think this is a rather excitable interpretation of what was in reality an unfortunate attempt by Schmitt to ally himself with the new National Socialist regime.

In his 1950 essay *Three Possibilities for a Christian Conception of History*, translated only recently, Schmitt declares that the essence of Christianity is not “morality” or “doctrine... but

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<sup>89</sup> Schmitt, C., 1934 (2005), p. 54

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, p. 55

<sup>91</sup> Schmitt, C., 1934 (2005), p. 55

<sup>92</sup> Croce, M. & Salvatore, A., 2013, *The Legal Theory of Carl Schmitt*, (Abingdon: Routledge)

a historical event, non-appropriable, non-occupiable singularity. It is the incarnation in the Virgin Mary.”<sup>93</sup> In this, history has a “Marian image,”<sup>94</sup> a concrete historical specificity in the person of Christ whose birth is necessitated from the acceptance of God’s will. Mary’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 *pan rema* with which Christ admonished the tempter when he challenged Christ to make bread from stones.”<sup>95</sup> The “intensity of impatience” is an immanent attaching of oneself to God, while “the law of God,” issues from transcendence and has to be taken on faith 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 handmaiden of the Lord, be it done to me according to thy word] is the ‘total ground and total image’ of man’s answer, which is demanded by the omnipotence of God.”<sup>96</sup> Just as in Ockham and Bonald one can either accept or reject this revelation, but there is nothing in between. It is Schmitt’s claim that these words of the Virgin Mary, the renouncement of one’s own will before the majesty of God, are at the root of both the voluntarist crisis in theology and the decisionist crisis of Weimar. At the centre of both is a recognition of the all-powerful God as the one who decides on the exception.

What is crucial for Schmitt is that history’s “Marian image” isn’t just an obscure mysticism but means that the allowance of individual conscience (as, most famously, in Hobbes) is and will always be the original sin of the political itself; it constantly resurrects the horrifying possibility of Mary’s turning around to God and saying ‘no.’ This is the origin of what is later

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<sup>93</sup> Schmitt, C., 1950 (2009), ‘Three Possibilities for a Christian Conception of History’, transl. Wenning, M, *Telos*, 147 (Summer), p. 169-170

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, p. 170

<sup>95</sup> Schmitt, C., 1917 (1996), *The Visibility of the Church*, transl. Ulmen, G. L., (London: Greenwood Press), pp. 49-50

<sup>96</sup> Meier, H., 1994 (1998), p. 89

to be called 'representation,' but which in 1917's *The Visibility of the Church* is, after the Catholic doctrine, called "mediation."<sup>97</sup> The mediation of the sovereign will to the individual human being becomes the most *important temporal aspect* of the acceptance of the sovereign will itself. This mediation is present through the Catholic Church, which contains *the archetypical political form, the complexio oppositorum*. I will only gesture towards this hugely underappreciated central concept in Schmitt's thought, having excavated its foundations throughout this dissertation. Schmitt's idea is that the form of the Catholic Church manages to fulfil the "Marcionitic either/or" with a "strict realisation of the principle of representation" in which two opposites are mystically brought together in a "union of antitheses."<sup>98</sup> This "limitless ambiguity" makes possible the "will to decision"<sup>99</sup> where Tertullian's second most famous (though misattributed) phrase, "I believe because it is absurd,"<sup>100</sup> is made politically concrete. Thus, "the mediator descends, because the mediation can only proceed from above, not from below. Salvation lies in that God becomes man (not that man becomes God)."<sup>101</sup> The rejection of 'man' becoming 'God' is a rejection of this conception of the totally sovereign (and hence self-legitimizing) individual and a recognition that hierarchy is essentially a recognition of, and not merely an imposition upon, a concrete order.

For Schmitt the immanence-transcendence divide is, then, a brutal and Bonaldian choice that one must make when confronted by the reality of sovereignty within the state and by the voluntarist authority of God. Thus he opposes those Christian sects who have denied the visible (concrete) reality of the Church in the world with the Catholic Church itself, stating that "every religious sect which has transposed the concept of the Church from the visible community of believing Christians into a *corpus mere mysticum* basically has doubts about the humanity of the Son of God."<sup>102</sup> Regardless of the actual truth of this statement the centrality of the incarnation to the visible representation of sovereignty in the world should strike us. Thus, the first true decision of history, the incarnation, is absolutely both totally human and totally metaphysical. The Church's ability to trace its lineage back to that moment of assent to God's authority in the *fiat mihi* is essential, to Schmitt, to its place as the perfect analogue for political authority in the world.

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<sup>97</sup> Schmitt, C., 1917 (1996), p. 52

<sup>98</sup> Schmitt, C., 1923 (1996), p. 8

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, p. 8

<sup>100</sup> Harrison, P., "I Believe Because it is Absurd": The Enlightenment Invention of Tertullian's *Credo*, *Church History*, 86(2), pp. 339-364

<sup>101</sup> Schmitt, C., 1917 (1996), p. 52

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid*, p. 52

## Concluding Remarks

My aim in this dissertation has been to set Schmitt's political thought within a theological context. Indeed, it has been to question the boundaries between the political and the theological as distinct ideas. Schmitt's work constantly references theological ideas, thinkers, and concepts, and I hope that this dissertation has gone some way towards correcting a political theoretical approach to Schmitt's work that doesn't take this thought seriously on its own terms. If, Schmitt seems to be saying, a rejection of 'theology and metaphysics' in its traditional sense *always and inevitably* leads to a rejection of the exception, then theology and metaphysics are *necessary*, regardless of their actual truth content, to both the political and to the concrete order which is realised in the state. This, ultimately, is Schmitt's claim, and one that explains the deeply problematic attempt to read Schmitt as a strictly non-theological thinker. I am sure that Schmitt himself would not be surprised that many political theorists and intellectual historians continue to make this mistake.

I would also like to point out two areas of interest for future research. Firstly, there is clearly room for a more developed conception of Schmitt's understanding of voluntarist theology; the length-constraint of this dissertation has, perhaps inevitably, meant that I have had to paint this influence in rather broad brushstrokes. Secondly, there is an almost totally unexplored connection in the academic literature between neo-orthodox theology, particularly the thought of Karl Barth, and Schmitt's political theory. I have only been able to hint at these connections here, but the place of Barth in the current intellectual historical narratives of the twentieth century is notable by its absence.

Finally, I would like to suggest that a more robust conception of Schmitt's properly theologically grounded political theory would have much to say, as this dissertation has already suggested, regarding that contested concept of 'representation', only indicated here. Nevertheless, Schmitt's derisive comment to those who might think that in the Church there is "only external form [and] mockingly must say it represents nothing more than the idea of representation"<sup>103</sup> should be a warning. If Schmitt thinks that political form cannot be understood apart from its metaphysical core then we should take this seriously. Schmitt writes that "all sectarians and heretics have refused to recognize the extent to which the personalism

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid, p. 19

inherent in the idea of representation is human in the deepest sense”<sup>104</sup> 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.

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid, p. 33

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