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Taming Religion, Managing Meaning

Religion, Secularization, and the Problem of Meaning in Politics

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Political Science

by

Joshua William Campbell

2026

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2026

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Taming Religion, Managing Meaning

Religion, Secularization, and the Problem of Meaning in Politics

by

Joshua William Campbell

Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

University of California, Los Angeles, 2026

Professor Anthony R. Pagden, Co-Chair

Professor Tejas Parasher, Co-Chair

This dissertation investigates the fraught and often-ambiguous relationship between politics and substantive human meaning – considered here broadly as a framework within which individual human actions are situated and that suggests lives worth living, a proper order of human affairs, the appropriate relations between individuals or social/political positionalities, and/or the larger significance of human endeavor, suffering, etc. This project claims that discussions of the relation of meaning to politics are today trapped in a paradigm oriented around the liberal principles of secularism and public neutrality and whether these principles render liberal politics "meaningless" and thus uniquely susceptible to irruptions of meaningful politics from exclusivist nationalism, far-right

populism, and religious fundamentalism. By engaging with three key participants in the German secularization debate (1922–1976), Carl Schmitt, Karl Löwith, and Eric Voegelin, and one late entrant into the debate, Jürgen Habermas, I seek to move beyond this limiting paradigm and recover a broader set of theoretical reflections on both the necessity and dangers of substantive human meaning within political communities. Through readings of these four figures, this dissertation demonstrates that concerns and contestations around the relation of meaning to politics, rather than being unique to liberalism, are a persistent and inescapable feature of political life – and that every political form, liberalism included, inevitably develops a substantive meaningful core, as well as techniques by which to manage alternate frameworks of meaning that threaten the unity of the political community. Ultimately, this dissertation argues for placing questions of meaning at the center of political thought and discourse and suggests that not only may (post)secular questions of religion and politics be more usefully framed as questions of meaning in politics, but also that politics itself may be usefully defined as the management of meaning.

This dissertation of Joshua William Campbell is approved.

Giulia Sissa

Natasha Piano

Tejas Parasher, Committee Co-Chair

Anthony R. Pagden, Committee Co-Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2026

For Kevin, forever

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VITA

Josh Campbell holds a B.A. in Political Science, Mathematics, and Economics, as well as a B.S. in Television, Radio, and Film, from Syracuse University and an M.A. in Social Sciences from the University of Chicago. Their research interests include religion and politics, critical secularism studies, Indigenous political thought, and comparative political theory. Their work has appeared or is forthcoming in *South Atlantic Quarterly* and *Global Intellectual History*, as well as in two edited volumes.

Introduction

1. A Crisis of Meaning?

For anyone marginally engaged with popular political discourse, it is difficult to escape the notion that we are currently in the midst of a "crisis of meaning." Writing in the New York Times in 2025, the opinion columnist David Brooks cautioned his readers about the rise of right-wing nihilism. On Books' account, unlike the generation of conservatives to which he belongs, current right-wing youth have no meaningful values, beliefs, or truths to guide their politics – the result is a drive to destroy the status quo without any positive alternative: destruction for its own sake. The stakes are high here: Brooks recounts the "rise in nihilism that plagued Germany…after World War I. We saw what that led to." But not all is lost. Closing on an optimistic note, Brooks celebrates, as an antidote to this nihilism, a contemporary religious revival: "One spot of good news is the fact that more young people…are returning to church."[1]

Brooks is far from alone in his hand-wringing over the apparent dearth of meaning in modern life. Indeed, a cursory glance at any list of recent popular political or self-help publications will immediately reveal no shortage of writers diagnosing and/or offering solutions to a "crisis of meaning." In a New York Times Bestseller, the journalist Katherine Stewart paints an alarming picture of a right-wing, anti-democratic "reactionary nihilism" that views the world as "devoid of value, impervious to reason, and governable only through brutal acts of will."[2] Chris Murphy, a Democratic senator from

[1] David Brooks, "The Rise of Right-Wing Nihilism," *The New York Times*, August 21, 2025.

[2] Katherine Stewart, *Money, Lies, and God: Inside the Movement to Destroy American Democracy* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2025).

Connecticut and 2028 presidential hopeful, has made the perceived "crisis of meaning" a key part of his political messaging, going so far as to foreground it in a 2026 book that, in all likelihood, will serve as a large-scale focus group in preparation for the 2028 debate stage.[3] And, perhaps most prominently, the academic-turned-self-help-guru Jordan Peterson mixes traditionalism, psychological research, and ad-hoc literary and historical analysis to offer his readers twelve simple rules that promise to help them overcome the "desperation of meaninglessness."[4]

Were these assessments limited to talking-heads, politicos, and pseudo-philosophical grifters, we might readily dismiss them as overblown or opportunistic. However, concerns over a current crisis of meaning have been expressed by myriad scholars from a range of political standpoints and disciplinary backgrounds. For political theorists, the perceived meaninglessness of contemporary life is a problem not limited to the individual impact of individual malaise. Instead, crises of meaning are often taken to render politics particularly unstable and feed into the formation and ascent of destructive or exclusionary political movements that purport to fill the vacuum of meaning experienced in individual life. The connection that Brooks draws between the rise of Nazism and a generalized sense of meaninglessness is therefore not a personal intellectual idiosyncrasy. Rather, it reflects a much broader perspective, both within and beyond academia, that crises of meaning may easily spill over into political crises.

[3] Chris Murphy, *Crisis of the Common Good: The Fight for Meaning and Connection in a Broken America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2026).

[4] Jordan B. Peterson, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* (Random House of Canada, 2018). See also: John Vervaeke and Christopher Mastropietro, *Awakening from the Meaning Crisis, Book 1: Origins* (Nashville: Story Grid Publishing, 2024).

For contemporary writers who take this view, regardless of political or ideological persuasion, liberalism frequently plays a critical role in the emergence and political efficacy of crises of meaning. Specifically, liberalism is often considered, due (in part) to its purported neutrality with respect to conceptions of the good life, to offer no substantive, public meaning for its citizens beyond what they find in their various personal philosophies, creeds, and ways of life. Liberals and non-liberals, as well as illiberals proposing hard political alternatives grounded in exclusionary conceptions of race, religion, or nation, are joined on this point: There seems to be something about liberalism that renders it uniquely "meaningless," and hence renders it uniquely susceptible to irruptions of meaningful politics. Any discussion of the relation of substantive human meaning to politics today will almost always find itself operating within this framework

In this dissertation, I seek to move beyond this particular way of theorizing the problem of meaning and politics by turning to the German secularization debate – a set of writings from twentieth-century German theorists on the implications of secularization (in the Weberian mode) on contemporary thought and politics. Reading this debate as fundamentally concerned with the relation of politics to substantive frameworks of meaning (or, alternately, the lack of such substantive frameworks) provides an expanded perspective on the problem of meaning and politics that can help us move beyond the attenuated framework and assumptions that often attend discussions of meaning in liberal democratic contexts. Specifically, this dissertation shows that concerns regarding the destabilizing force of crises of meaning are common across multiple political forms, both liberal and illiberal, and traces the various ways that different political scholars have sought to comprehend and manage these crises by managing the public appearance of certain sources of meaning. I suggest that

returning to this broader set of work on the relation of meaning to politics can both displace the restrictive framework in which current discussions of the topic are frequently trapped and provide useful theoretical resources with which to think through crises of political meaning today.

In this introduction, I first in Section 2 introduce the German secularization debate – its key figures, some of the lines of argument most associated with the debate, and the common interpretation of the debate in secondary literature. In Section 3, I provide a preliminary account of, so to speak, the meaning of meaning – while each writer addressed in this dissertation theorizes human meaning in slightly different ways, they are joined in treating it as a powerful motivational force within politics. I look to the later work of Max Weber, who exerted a profound direct and indirect influence on each participant in the German secularization debate, to develop a preliminary account of meaning that makes it usable by political-theoretical analysis and allows us to conceptualize a persistent *problem of meaning and politics* to which each of the writers in this dissertation respond. Section 4 then engages contemporary scholarly accounts of a crisis of meaning and theorizes the existence and political import of a *liberal exceptionalism* in contemporary thought regarding the question of meaning and politics – specifically, to many concerned with this topic, liberalism, alone among political forms, uniquely lacks meaning and thus uniquely lacks the substantive resources with which to defend itself against hard political alternatives that posit thick conceptions of the meaning and purpose of collective human life. Section 5 argues that, given its intellectual context, the German secularization debate offers a particularly fruitful archive through which to expand our thinking on questions of meaning and politics. Section 6 then articulates the interpretative approach this dissertation takes to its subject matter and summarizes the contents and interventions of the individual chapters.

2. The German Secularization Debate

The German secularization debate was a series of publications and epistolary exchanges between German writers around the mid-twentieth century. Carl Schmitt's *Political Theology* (1922) is generally considered the inception of the debate:[5] In his famous claim at the beginning of the third chapter – that "All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts"[6] – Schmitt challenged the traditional view of secularization, that religion was bound to privatize and decline in both individual and political salience in the modern world. Instead, Schmitt seemed to claim, religion, particularly Roman Catholicism, had continued to provide the structure and organizing principles of public, political life. In the following decades, a set of other major figures introduced separate but resonant claims that drew various connections between a supposedly religiously drenched past and a purportedly secular present. For example, Eric Voegelin's *Political Religions* (1938) drew a genealogical link between the ideological structure of totalitarian regimes and the secularization of the *corpus mysticum* as a symbol of the Christian community.[7] And Karl Löwith's *Meaning in History* (1949) argued that modern philosophies of history, the notion of inevitable

[5] That said, some accounts of the German secularization debate start with figures like Hegel and include writers up to the twenty-first century such as the Egyptologist Jan Assmann, whom Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins calls "the last great thinker in the German secularization debate." Generally speaking, Germanophone accounts of the GSD are more likely to include predecessors like Hegel (while still emphasizing the twentieth century as the core of the debate), while Anglophone accounts typically limit themselves a narrower timespan and focus largely on Schmitt, Löwith, Voegelin, and Blumenberg. See: Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins, "Secularization and Theologization: Introduction to Jan Assmann's Monotheism," in *Genealogies of the Secular: The Making of Modern German Thought*, ed. Willem Styfhals and Stéphane Symons (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019), 219–29.

[6] Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 36

[7] Eric Voegelin, "The Political Religions," in *Modernity without Restraint*, ed. Manfred Henningsen, trans. Virginia Ann Schildhauer (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 19–74.

progress above all, emerged as secularized forms of Christian salvation history[8] – a claim that was later taken up and reinterpreted by Voegelin in his second contribution to the debate.[9] In addition, a number of relatively minor figures, including the dialectical theologian Rudolf Bultmann, the Catholic lay theologian Erik Peterson, the philosopher Jacob Taubes, and the political scientist Waldemar Gurian, each expanded the reach and influence of the debate through syntheses, critiques, and variations on these core figures.[10]

Within secondary literature, the German secularization debate is typically interpreted as a contestation over the legitimacy and autonomy of the secular age,[11] with those on the attacking, anti-modern side seeking to uncover the presence of religion in institutions like the Westphalian sovereign state and the theory of progress that, on this interpretation, represent the "core of the self-consciousness of modernity: that it is unproblematically areligious, founded on 'reason alone,' and that modernization is unequivocally a good thing."[12] Indeed, the first great interpreter of (and, on

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

[9] Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

[10] Erik Peterson, "Monotheism as a Political Problem," in *Theological Tractates*, trans. Michael J. Hollerich (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 68–105; Jacob Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, trans. David Ratmoko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); Rudolf Bultmann, *History and Eschatology: The Presence of Eternity* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957); Waldemar Gurian, "Totalitarian Religions," *The Review of Politics* 14, no. 1 (1952): 3–14. Of these, Jacob Taubes and Erik Peterson are arguably the most influential: the latter due to his prominent critique of Schmitt (to which Schmitt responded in his final publication prior to his death) and the former because he importantly "contributed to the perception that the different reflections on secularization in postwar German thought can be conceived as a real debate." Regarding Taubes on this point, see: Willem Styfhals and Stéphane Symons, "Introduction," in *Genealogies of the Secular: The Making of Modern German Thought*, ed. Willem Styfhals and Stéphane Symons (Albany: State University of New York, 2019), 1–18, pp. 12–14. For Schmitt's response to Peterson, see: Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology II: The Myth of the Closure of Any Political Theology*, trans. Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2008), especially Ch. 2

[11] For example, see: Sjoerd Griffioen, *Contesting Modernity in the German Secularization Debate: Karl Löwith, Hans Blumenberg and Carl Schmitt in Polemical Contexts* (Boston: Brill, 2022); Robert W. Wallace, "Progress, Secularization and Modernity: The Löwith-Blumenberg Debate," *New German Critique* 22 (1981): 63–79. Joe Paul Kroll, "A Human End to History: Hans Blumenberg, Karl Löwith, and Carl Schmitt on Secularization and Modernity" (Ph.D Dissertation, Princeton, 2010), https://www.proquest.com/docview/578517796?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true.

[12] Sjoerd Griffioen, *Contesting Modernity in the German Secularization Debate*, p. 3

many accounts, the last great participant in) the German secularization debate, Hans Blumenberg, critiqued his predecessors on precisely this point. On his reading, the claims of Schmitt, Löwith, Voegelin, and their intellectual allies imply that secular modernity has engaged in an "illegitimate appropriation" of prior theological contents – and consequently, that the worldviews, philosophies and political structures of the twentieth century are themselves illegitimate: a view that Blumenberg influentially rejected in his defense of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*.[13]

As Sjoerd Griffioen notes, Blumenberg's book had a significant influence on later readers of the German secularization debate, with his own framing and accounts of Schmitt and Löwith serving to structure many subsequent interpretations.[14] It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that his account of the debate as centered on the legitimacy of modern philosophy and politics, or their illegitimate debt to theological notions, has tended to dominate the secondary literature. Against this common, overarching framework of interpretation, I read the German secularization debate as fundamentally concerned with the relation between politics and substantive conceptions of meaning (or the lack thereof). For each of the four writers addressed in this dissertation, this relation was a deeply fraught and problematic one.

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[13] Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991). Blumenberg's work first appeared as a 1962 lecture at the Seventh German Congress for Philosophy, was expanded into a book published in 1966, and finally appeared in a second, definitive edition published in three volumes in 1973, 1974, and 1976 after incorporating critiques from (primarily) Schmitt and (secondarily) Löwith and Hans-Georg Gadamer, among others. Lawrence Dickey provides a useful overview of the changes between the first and second editions, while Joe Paul Kroll discusses the development of Blumenberg's critique of secularization narratives from the 1962 lecture through to the second edition of *Legitimacy*. See: Robert Wallace, "Translator's Introduction," in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), p. xi; Lawrence Dickey, "Blumenberg and Secularization: 'Self-Assertion' and the Problem of Self-Realizing Teleology in History," *New German Critique* 41 (1987): 151–65. Joe Paul Kroll, *A Human End to History* pp. 131-151

[14] Sjoerd Griffioen, "Secularization between Faith and Reason: Reinvestigating the Löwith-Blumenberg Debate," *New German Critique* 46, no. 1 (2019): 71–101, pp. 71–72

3. Preliminary Concepts: Weber and Meaning

This dissertation, then, is fundamentally concerned with the concept of human meaning, but this term is more than a bit opaque. How exactly can we understand the concept of meaning in a way that makes it useful for political-theoretical analysis? There is, of course, no shortage of historical and contemporary philosophical meditations on the concept of a meaningful life,[15] but in considering the relevance of meaning to politics, we must go beyond claims of what makes individual lives or actions meaningful: We must instead ask how human meaning conditions or drives collective, political action. While each of the writers addressed in this dissertation conceives of meaning in a different way, they are unified in approaching it not (only) as a source of individual well-being, but as a palpable political force. The work of Max Weber provides a useful preliminary account of the political efficacy of meaning – not only because of the clarity of his description, but also because Weber exerted a profound influence, both directly and indirectly, on each of the four writers addressed here.[16]

Weber became increasingly concerned with human meaning throughout his life and work. Indeed, Stephen Kalberg claims that Weber, as a result of his "deep concern that the modern West stood at the precipice of a potentially debilitating crisis of meaning," turned in his later work to a comparative sociology focused on "how people in different civilizations and epochs...attributed *meaning* on a regular basis to *certain* types of activity."[17] Michael Symonds views this focus as so

[15] For a useful overview, see the contributions to Iddo Landau, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Meaning in Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

[16] For example, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, Schmitt was sometimes taken (including by Habermas and Löwith) to be a successor to Weber, while Lowith was one of the few to attend both Vocation lectures and spoke in his memoirs of the impact it had on his thinking.

[17] Stephen Kalberg, "Max Weber," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Major Social Theorists*, ed. George Ritzer and Jeffrey Stepnisky (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 305–72..

central to Weber's late thought that his entire theory of modernity can be interpreted through the lens of meaning and its shifting manifestations and structures.[18] Weber's turn to the centrality of meaning to human politics and society is also reflected in his post-hoc revisions to prior works: As Friedrich Tenbruck notes, once Weber developed his notion of disenchantment – intimately connected to shifts in the form and (dis)unity of human meaning – he returned to previous publications, including *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,* and revised or enlarged them to align with and incorporate this concept.[19]

As is well known (and sometimes aggressively criticized), Weber figures meaning (and relatedly, values) as inherently subjective and resistant to rational evaluation.[20] This subjectivity means that, for those far removed from our own context, "we are very often not capable of...understanding [ultimate purposes and values] by empathetically reliving them." At the same time, however, an intellectual, if not empathetic, understanding of such meaning is crucial to accounting for a wide swath of human action. Broadly speaking, the role of meaning in Weber's work is to provide a counterpoint to behavior that is either purely rational or purely "reflexive" – the presence of "contexts of meaning" and their key role in human behavior implies that social action cannot be discerned

[18] Michael Symonds, *Max Weber's Theory of Modernity: The Endless Pursuit of Meaning* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2015).

[19] Friedrich Tenbruck, "The Problem of Thematic Unity in the Works of Max Weber," *The British Journal of Sociology* 31, no. 3 (1980): 316–51, especially pp. 319–321. See also: Egil Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment: Scientific Naturalism and Esoteric Discourse, 1900-1939* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018), pp. 19–22

[20] Michael W. Cuneo, "Values and Meaning: Max Weber's Approach to the Idea of Ultimate Reality and Meaning," *Ultimate Reality and Meaning* 13, no. 2 (1990): 84–95. For one such critique of Weber, see: Alasdair Macintyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, Third Edition (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), pp. 26–27: "For on Weber's view no type of authority can appeal to rational criteria to vindicate itself except that type of bureaucratic authority which appeals precisely to its own *effectiveness*. And what this appeal reveals is that bureaucratic authority is nothing other than successful power."

causally in the manner of physical or biological sciences. Instead, a sociological understanding of this action requires uncovering its "subjectively intended meaning" based on its broader social and emotional context.[21]

For Weber, then, the presence and impact of "irrational, affectively conditioned, meaningful contexts for behavior" on some set of actions can be discerned by way of contrast with a "constructed, purely purposively rational course for such action:" When behavior departs from biological reflex or purposive-rational means to a concrete and evident end, the presence of emotional-affective meaning can be said to be efficacious. The sociologist Michael Mann influentially rearticulated this concept of meaning and further emphasized its importance to political and social life. For Mann, structures of meaning are central to a particular form of social power – i.e. the "capacity to get others to do things that otherwise they would not do." In his typology, ideological power (as distinct from economic incentives, military coercion, or political regulation) "derives from the human need to find ultimate meaning in life, to share norms and values, and to participate in aesthetic and ritual practices with others." This form of power, he claims, will be particularly salient in times of crisis: "Revived religious meaning systems will figure in this period, as will secular ideologies."[22]

In pre-modern societies, Weber claims, these contexts of meaning tend to be unified, shared among all members of a given society and typically articulated through religious discourse. In contrast, the modern, secularized world is also a disenchanted one – a world fragmented into specializations

[21] Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019), pp. 77–90

[22] Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power, Volume 4: Globalizations, 1945–2011* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 1–2

with instrumental procedures and knowledge in each sphere of activity. While enabling the development of "techniques whereby we can control life…through calculation," the disenchanted world provides no unified framework of interpretation, comparable to the role once played by religion, by which any sphere of life can be considered meaningful as an end rather than means. Some respond to this by seeking out religious experience – or, indeed, "experience as such" – but Weber declares meaning in a disenchanted world is bound to itself be fragmented – it has "withdrawn from public life," with each individual "find[ing] and obey[ing] the daemon that holds the threads of *his* life"[23]

As Steven Seidman notes, Weber's account of meaning is frequently "assimilated to the romantic antimodernism that pervaded Wilhelmian Germany," which bemoaned the total evacuation of meaning from life as a result of secularism and modernization.[24] However, Weber instead claims that the need and search for meaning is an irreducible element of human existence that cannot simply vanish within the modern world.[25] What has changed with disenchantment and rationalization is not that meaning *in toto* has disappeared, but rather, it has lost its unity (as well as, in many cases, its religious sanction) and become individualized, or at least differentiated into separate realms of activity – while still acting as a motive force, particular frameworks of meaning are no longer, as a rule, shared among all members of a particular community.

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[23] Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in *The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David Owen and Tracey Strong, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004), 1–32.

[24] Steven Seidman, "Modernity, Meaning, and Cultural Pessimism in Max Weber," *Sociological Analysis* 44, no. 4 (1983), p. 272

[25] As Symonds puts it: "It seems clear that Weber assumes that there is a universal human need for meaning," which, throughout history and around the world, "will come to be articulated in the varieties of religious belief." See: Michael Symonds, *Max Weber's Theory of Modernity*, p. 7.

The writers addressed in this dissertation largely accept and echo Weber's account of meaning in its relation to political action. Meaning for them possesses dual implications: It is both meaning in the sense of comprehensibility or explanation (e.g., the meaning of an action, a claim, a political form) *and* meaning in the sense of ultimate non-instrumental purpose. However, with the possible exception of Habermas, the writers addressed in this dissertation reject Weber's conception of meaning in modernity as individualized: Rather than each individual finding and obeying their own daemon, Schmitt, Löwith, and Voegelin each consider human meaning as essentially collective, even in the secular context of twentieth-century Europe. In short then, while each figure addressed in this dissertation theorizes meaning differently, a useful preliminary definition for our purposes would emphasize that: Meaning is a collectively held set of beliefs or claims that provides motivation for human action by suggesting notions of the good life, the proper order of human affairs, a purpose or goal to (collective) human existence, and/or by situating individual human existence and efforts within a broader affective context to which they contribute.

A further aspect of Weber's account of meaning is relevant here: specifically, the notion that meaning is, or at least has historically been, primarily carried by religious claims of transcendence. As Symonds notes, Weber's "theory of meaning is exhibited primarily in a series of works that might loosely be said to fall under the umbrella of his sociology of religion" – and even when Weber is referring to secular forms of meaning in a disenchanted age, he "employs concepts taken from his accounts of religion."[26] This correspondence in Weber's work between religion and meaning is far

[26] Michael Symonds, *Max Weber's Theory of Modernity*, p. 5. Symonds here lists terms like spirit, vocation, salvation, redemption, fate, brotherliness, cosmos, gods, and daemon. See also: Steven Seidman, "Modernity, Meaning,

from coincidental: Rather, the tendency to refer to secular frameworks of meaning – whether ideologies, philosophies, or natural-scientific systems of knowledge – as "religions" is a long-running theme in Western thought, dating back at least to that great secular rupture in European history: the French Revolution.

For example, Condorcet used religiously inflected language in denouncing forms of education that were geared towards inculcating "blind enthusiasm" towards a pseudo-sacred constitution: "If we tell them: here is what you should worship and believe in, we are attempting to create a kind of political religion...we are violating liberty's most sacred rights." Around the same time, the moderate liberal German poet Christoph Martin Wieland similarly used the notion of "political religion" to "describe the indoctrination of the revolutionary armies."[27] The immediate historiography of the Revolution continued this line of characterization. Michelet's *History of the French Revolution* juxtaposed the common faith of the Revolutionaries with the disharmony of the counter-revolutionary backlash: "The Revolution, growing more and more harmonised and in unison, appears every day more plainly what it is, a religion. And the Counter-Revolution, dissenting and discordant, attests the old faith in vain; it is not a religion." As a consequence, the Revolutionary side of the conflict is "effulgent with light," enabling coordinated action towards a common purpose, whereas on the counter-revolutionary side, "everything is equivocal, all uncertainty, and darkness."[28] Similarly,

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and Cultural Pessimism in Max Weber," p. 268: "Weber submits that throughout history religion has functioned to satisfy the human need for meaning."

[27] For Wieland and Condorcet, see: Philippe Burrin, "Political Religion: The Relevance of a Concept," *History and Memory* 9, no. 1/2 (1997): 321–49. The Condorcet quote is taken from p. 322.

[28] Jules Michelet, *History of the French Revolution*, ed. Gordon Wright, trans. Charles Cocks (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), pp. 430–431

Tocqueville dedicated a chapter of *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution* to the question of "How the French Revolution Was a Political Revolution that Proceeded in the Manner of Religious Revolutions, and Why." The French Revolution, he claims, was grounded in universal principles that aimed not specifically at the politics proper to the French people, but those proper to "man in general." Like universal religions, the Revolution therefore took on a salvific quality: "it appeared to aim at the regeneration of the human race even more than at the reform of France," which inspired "passion…proselytism and propaganda" and "inundated the earth with its soldiers, apostles, and martyrs." This religious quality, Tocqueville writes, is "what contemporaries found so frightening about it."[29]

The "frightening" character of the "religious" ideology of the French Revolution discussed by Tocqueville, considered alongside the unity that Michelet saw in the same religious tenor of the same Revolution, reflects a fundamental and long-running trend in Western thought: Specifically, religion within political theorizing has long borne a Janus-faced quality, serving as an emblem of both order and disorder. On one hand, a common meaningful framework (typically articulated through religious language) has long been considered crucial to the stability of an existing political system, as an important source of social solidarity and a bulwark against internal strife and anti-social behavior. On this point, Durkheim formalized and made explicit what had been present in, for example, Rousseau's "civil religion" or Comte's "Religion of Humanity:" the notion that some kind of shared meaningful substance, a "religion" (whether secular/civil or transcendental) is necessary to "unite [individuals]

[29] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*, ed. Jon Elster, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), Ch. 1.3

into one single moral community" on the basis of some shared "ideal" that enables them to "[act] in common."[30] Per this conception, religion is a stabilizing force – a (on some accounts, pre-political) source of fellow-feeling that itself creates a collective by joining individuals in a common moral order, common purpose, and common conception of the good beyond (but very much relevant to) a given political order.

On the other hand, religion has long been considered a source of instability and violence, particularly when considered in its plurality. This notion dates at least to the European Wars of Religion and the concept of Westphalian sovereignty that emerged from these conflicts – the principle of "*cuius regio, eius religio*," constitutes, as, for example, in Hobbes, the subjugation of religion to civil power in the interest of preventing factional strife stemming from religious disunity. Within the climate of the Euro-American twenty-first century, this concern that the motivational force of religious meaning represents an existential political threat has manifested in often-overblown and/or misplaced fears of "Islamist" violence.[31] However, concerns over the power of substantive religious conceptions of the good, the right, the proper in relation to politics go far beyond Islamophobia: Indeed, the sense of danger that religious meaning evokes appears even on the level of language: Political objects of fear are frequently described using religious language and criticized on that basis.

[30] Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995), pp. 44, 419–425

[31] As Martha Nussbaum notes, there exists within much of the West a general "fear of a Muslim takeover" that often attributes Islamist motivations even to non-Muslim actors – as reflected in the eagerness of many media outlets and commentators to attribute the 2011 mass killing in Norway committed by Anders Behring Breivik to Islamic terrorism. See: Martha C. Nussbaum, *The New Religious Intolerance: Overcoming the Politics of Fear in an Anxious Age* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2012).

Thus one hears personalist styles of populism described as "messianic,"[32] the overblown promises of technological thought criticized as a "techno-theodicy,"[33] and perhaps most famously, the dismissal of Marxism as a "secular religion," which one commentator notes has produced a "voluminous literature."[34]

In short, "religion" as a rhetorical or analytical concept becomes salient for many scholars at the point they encounter a substantive system of meaning that either threatens or upholds a given social order and that seems to provide motives for (political) action that stand outside of, or directly opposed to, a given notion of rationally oriented behavior. I suggest that many concerns about religion, both within and beyond liberal thought, may be more usefully theorized as concerns about substantive human meaning. "Religion" in these cases operates as both a heuristic and a cypher: a ready-made concept that renders comprehensible otherwise-amorphous dynamics and actions that seem unexplainable to a given observer. Moreover, given the ambiguity of religion discussed above – as both protector of and threat to political stability – "religion" as a rhetorical concept can also serve as an easy tool of critique and/or defense: To describe something as a religion is to either claim that its adherents are stably united in a common purpose or goal, and/or that they are defined by a cryptic, irrational, yet powerfully motivating mode of thought that must be quarantined, if not destroyed. To Michelet, the Revolution was a religion because (in contrast to the counterrevolution) it inspired a

[32] Jose Pedro Zúquete, "Populism and Religion," in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 73–98.

[33] Brad Evans and Chantal Meza, "The Techno-Theodicy: How Technology Became the New Religion," *Theory & Event* 25, no. 3 (2022): 639–64.

[34] Thomas Albert Howard, *Religion and the Rise of Historicism: W.M.L. de Wette, Jacob Burckhardt, and the Theological Origins of Nineteenth-Century Historical Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 178n.92.

unity of action and self-sacrificial quality among its partisans. For Pope Pius XI, among many others, Marxism was a religion because it promised a "false messianic ideal" that "communicates a zealous and contagious enthusiasm to the multitudes entrapped by delusive promise."[35]

This observation leads us to two conclusions: First, concerns about the relation of religion to politics are, more often than not, concerns about the relation of substantive meaning and politics. It is the meaning-making aspect of religion, rather than, say, the specifics of institutional form, orthodoxy, or rituals themselves, that has the capacity to impinge on politics – inasmuch as other aspects of religion come into the picture, they are relevant due to their capacity to aid in this meaning-making, to provide conceptions of the ends or purposes of communal life that can motivate political action. These discussions should therefore not be limited to religion alone, because, naturally, secular ideologies and philosophies contain similar capacities for meaning-making.

Second, the Janus-faced quality of religion, as a source of both order and solidarity, on one hand, and disorder and factional strife, on the other, can instead be applied to systems of meaning more broadly. These long-running dual implications have generated a particular *problem of meaning and politics* that appears with remarkable consistency across a range of political theories: Specifically, how does a political community balance the need for substantive meaning to promote fellow-feeling and motivate political action with the fact that conceptions of meaning are (at least in the modern age) always plural and thus always contain a threat of instability and violence? Or, put another way: How does a political form manage meaning in such a way that it both supports the integrity and capacity for

[35] Pope Pius XI, "Divini Redemptoris," 1937, https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19370319_divini-redemptoris.html.

action of the political community, while at the same time ensuring that competing systems of meaning do not plunge the community into discord or civil conflict? The increasingly frequent diagnoses of a crisis of political meaning today indicate that this problem has once again become salient.

4. Meaning and Politics via Liberal Exceptionalism

Many of those diagnosing a crisis of meaning, and subsequently proffering solutions to this crisis, hold broadly illiberal positions. For example, the political theorist David Walsh warns of a new age of nihilism at the "end of modernity" but is optimistic that a return to transcendent and/or theological resources remains a live possibility: "Fragmentation can give way to meaning" if humans once again ground their values and principles of order in transcendent truth and "oneness with God."[36] Similarly, Patrick Deneen's widely read book *Why Liberalism Failed* claims that in triumphing over both its predecessors and twentieth-century competitors, liberalism eliminated the meaningful substantive values and relations that underpinned it in the first place: "liberalism teaches a people to hedge commitments and adopt flexible relationships and bonds. Not only are all political and economic relationships seen as fungible and subject to constant redefinition, so are all relationships – to place, to neighborhood, to nation, to family, and to religion."[37] Less widely read, but perhaps more influential, the legal scholar Adrian Vermeule, drawing heavily on Schmitt and Voegelin, bemoans the mechanistic governance of the liberal state and advocates remaking political order around a "substantive conception of the good" – one that respects and fulfills the "yearning for

[36] David Walsh, *After Ideology: Recovering the Spiritual Foundations of Freedom* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995).

[37] Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

community and for a transcendent horizon denied…[by] the liberal order." This call to place human meaning at the center of politics has manifested in Vermeule's turn to Catholic Integralism – variously presented by him in explicit or lightly disguised forms.[38]

However, such claims are not limited merely to the politics of illiberal reaction, but have also found purchase within liberal theory, as well as among liberalism's critics further to the left. William Connolly, for example, criticizes liberal secularism as the attempt to denigrate and exclude from public discourse a "visceral register" grounded in deeply held and contingent metaphysical and/or religious beliefs. The exclusion of this register generates "flat conceptions of theory, ethics, and public life." While the visceral register is not unique to religious claims, Connolly hopes that "an overt metaphysical/religious pluralism in public life" can reintroduce the visceral register and leverage it in support of an agonistic ethos of engagement.[39] Charles Taylor similarly foregrounds the implications of secularism on human meaning within a disenchanted world. Turning away from a legal-political definition of secularism, Taylor instead characterizes it as a transition from a situation in which religious belief could be "lived 'naively'…as simple reality" to one in which belief and unbelief each appear as plausible options, with the latter even becoming "the default option." Extending his previous meaning-centered critiques of modernity,[40] Taylor claims that this decline of transcendence

[38] Adrian Vermeule, "Integration from Within," *American Affairs* 2, no. 1 (2018); Adrian Vermeule, *Common Good Constitutionalism: Recovering the Classical Legal Tradition* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2022). On Vermeule's Integralism, see: Kevin Vallier, *All the Kingdoms of the World: On Radical Religious Alternatives to Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), especially pp. 15–20

[39] William E. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999)

[40] Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).

as a given presence within life has created widespread feelings of "malaise," the sense that our endeavors are at base "meaningless."[41]

The perceived meaninglessness of modern secular society has led some to propose new, anti-transcendental religions that are at once both political and meaningful – able to situate human efforts within a broader context and provide direction and value to human lives. For example, Roberto Mangabeira Unger's *Religion of the Future* frames religion in general as responding to the "meaninglessness" inherent in human mortality and existential "groundlessness." Transcendental world religions attempt to give meaning to these "defects" of existence by contextualizing them within a greater whole and denying their finality – but these attempts are ultimately too "fanciful" to achieve this aim. In contrast, Unger advocates a "religion of immanence" that foregrounds actually-existing social relations and embraces mortality and groundlessness, turning them from sources of meaninglessness into spurs to political action. The manmade meaning of Unger's religion of the future is therefore one that rejects implausible transcendental promises or purposes and instead accepts the "defects" of mortality and groundlessness as preconditions for the creation of meaning.[42] Simon Critchley has recently advocated an athetistic "faith of the faithless" to contend with similarly political-existential questions.[43]

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[41] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), especially Ch. 8

[42] Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *The Religion of the Future* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

[43] Simon Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology* (New York: Verso, 2014). Refer also to the work of Miguel Vatter, who seeks to reintroduce political theology into democratic politics in order to reinforce its legitimacy – a concept that, as indicated in the discussion of Carl Schmitt below, is deeply intertwined with meaning: Miguel E. Vatter, *Divine Democracy: Political Theology after Carl Schmitt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

The crisis of meaninglessness diagnosed by these authors is one that is specifically inflected through liberal secularism in the West,[44] and the apparent meaninglessness of liberal politics (as opposed to the liberal private sphere) has often been a source of crisis within the tradition. In his study of the relation between civil religion and liberalism, Ronald Beiner notes that one of the primary "human" objections to liberalism is its "banal" character – offering nothing to the "needs of the soul" or the "extremities of the spirit," liberalism (which for Beiner overlaps more-or-less completely with secularism) seems concerned only with the material conditions of life rather than with meaningful life.[45] This, as discussed below, can easily lapse into fears that, particularly in times of crisis, liberalism will appear ideologically weak relative to hard alternatives that promise to reorganize politics around a substantive conception of the good.

In response, some liberal theorists have attempted to recover within liberalism a more robust notion of collective meaning and purpose. Jeffrey Church, for example, traces the crisis of meaning to the "neoliberal turn in many Western countries [that] steadily evacuated moral language from politics…attenuating the sense of communal purpose that holds all societies together." The vacuum created by this "meaning deficit" has since been filled by exclusionary and illiberal populisms on both the right and the left, each of which "outcompetes" liberalism by offering a sense of collective

[44] While Saba Mahmood, among others, has shown that secularism as a legal principle and social fact exists in illiberal contexts, within the West, liberalism and secularism are, if not coterminous, at least overwhelmingly frequent fellow-travellers. See: Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016)

[45] See: Ronald Beiner, *Civil Religion: A Dialogue in the History of Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), especially pp. 1–7, 303–305, 411–416. Beiner in a separate publication connects this to teleological assumptions of liberalism's inevitable triumph, which has deemphasized the formulation of any "compelling account of the human good" in liberal philosophy and left it more vulnerable to substantive populist-nationalist backlash. See: Ronald Beiner, *Dangerous Minds: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Return of the Far Right* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), pp. 122–132

"meaning and purpose" to which each individual may contribute. Seeking to provide liberalism with more "substance," a more meaningful core, Church returns to Kant's early works, arguing that he provides a conception of liberalism oriented to the common meaningful goal of establishing the independence and liberty of each individual to pursue their own ends of life:

> "the imperfection of our nature gives liberalism an aim worth striving for, an aim to heal the divisions in our soul, a goal that can bring meaning and purpose to our collective lives – namely, the establishment of a regime that protects our freedom and realizes the conditions of its enjoyment. On the Kantian view, freedom represents precisely the substantive account of the meaning and purpose of our existence that can rival other illiberal sources of meaning in contemporary society."[46]

Church therefore attempts to navigate between substantive conceptions of the good and the liberal respect for the existence of pluralistic, incommensurable systems of meaning. This is largely Beiner's own strategy as well: The best rejoinder to claims of liberalism's "meaninglessness," he argues, is to recall the "heroic" aspects of liberalism in its "long struggle against religious orthodoxy and clerical power." Liberalism for both Church and Beiner is therefore meaningful only in a negative sense – it frees meaning from dogmatic strictures, allowing it to multiply guided by individual choice while creating a political system in which one's conception of the good life is not a precondition of membership.[47]

For some liberals, however, this limited and largely negative conception of meaning is insufficient. Alexandre Lefebvre, for example, criticizes defenses of liberalism that tend to focus on the flaws of its opponents (populists, nativists, etc.) or on the instrumental legal or political value of liberal

[46] Jeffrey Church, *Kant, Liberalism, and the Meaning of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022); see especially pp. 1–6, 249–250

[47] Ronald Beiner, *Civil Religion*, pp. 303–305, 411–416

institutions. In contrast, Lefebvre sets himself the task of defending liberalism as a substantive and meaningful conception of the good life – a "spiritual" or "existential" defense rather than an instrumental one. In embracing its substantive conceptions of the good, liberalism takes up "the core of religion: to seek meaning in life through something beyond us" – in this case, the "ideal of becoming a free and generous person in a fair and just society," centered on three concrete shared values of reciprocity, freedom, and fairness. While acknowledging the existence and legitimacy of "different and incompatible worldviews," Lefebvre claims that for citizens of liberal states, these worldviews are (or should and must be) inflected through these liberal values – and, moreover, that "a large class of people" hold no substantive worldview outside of these liberal values: "They are liberals, period."[48]

This is not to say, however, that liberalism had no account of meaning prior to these substantive reformulations. Classic theories of liberalism have typically presented it as neutral among competing and incommensurable sources of meaning – or "conceptions of the good life," as John Rawls termed them.[49] Connolly describes the typical story of this liberal neutrality as routing through the schism of the Reformation and responding to new conditions of pluralism: "The best hope for a peaceful and just world under these new circumstances was institution of a public life in which the final meaning of life, the proper route to life after death, and the divine source of morality were pulled out of the public realm and deposited into private life."[50] That is to say, liberalism endorses no

[48] Alexandre Lefebvre, *Liberalism as a Way of Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024).

[49] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Revised Edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), e.g., pp. 80–81

[50] William Connolly, *Why I Am not a Secularist,* p. 20

substantive, meaningful framework – including, following the principle/policy of secularism, religious meaning – instead creating a neutral public, political sphere that can accommodate a wide range of meaningful conceptions of the good life within the private, non-political sphere. Liberalism (at least in orthodox formulations) therefore envisions a private sphere saturated with meaning and a public sphere that, as a matter of principle, abjures meaning.

This principle of public neutrality represents the traditional liberal approach to the management of meaning: its relegation to the private sphere in the hopes that its potentially schismatic or destabilizing effects remain quarantined from the public sphere. The principle of secularism is a constitutive part of this mode of management oriented specifically towards religious sources of meaning. Importantly, this neutrality assumes secularization as a completed, historical fact inasmuch as it assumes that frameworks of meaning, "conceptions of the good," are thoroughly privitizable and individualizable, à la Weber's individual "daemon." In other words, both the "scholar who values a life of contemplation" and the "television-watching, beer-drinking citizen" – to take two examples from Ronald Dworkin[51] – can pursue their conceptions of the good individually, outside of any broader meaningful context.

However, as evidenced by the richly collective and political conceptions of meaning described above, both liberal and non-liberal theorists have become increasingly unhappy with this assumption, with many seeing in neutral-secular management a sharp political import: specifically, that a lack of substantive meaning leaves liberalism unable to adequately respond to or compete with forms of

[51] Ronald Dworkin, *A Matter of Principle* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 191

politics that encompass more robust conceptions of meaning – with totalitarianism, jingoistic nationalism, exclusionary populism, and religious fundamentalism as frequent *bêtes noires* of this strain of literature. For example, Michael Sandel, echoing broader communitarian critiques of liberalism, castigates the technocratic and market-oriented approach to governance as unable to adequately contend with the meaning-making dimensions of exclusionary political movements:

> "Conducting our public discourse as if it were possible to outsource moral and political judgement to markets, or to experts and technocrats, has emptied democratic argument of meaning and purpose. Such vacuums of public meaning are invariably filled in by harsh, authoritarian forms of identity and belonging – whether in the form of religious fundamentalism or strident nationalism."[52]

Similarly, Jeff Noonan suggests that an "overly developed search for meaning," conditioned by the collapse of shared, transcendent values and traditional communal roles, is what ultimately lies behind the "ultra-violence of a movement such as ISIS, or the anti-immigrant vehemence and policies of the MAGA movement." As an antidote, he suggests "tarrying with meaninglessness" – acknowledging the lack of any absolute purpose to life or politics, but embracing the contingency and "value of being alive here and now."[53] Likewise, Michael Albert emphasizes the difficulty of contending with the existential basis of political reaction. In *Navigating the Polycrisis*, he draws attention to the multiple, intertwined dimensions of crisis in the 2020s, including climate change and crises of capitalism (e.g., energy and food insecurity, as well as automation-induced unemployment).

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[52] Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: Can We Find the Common Good?* (New York: Picador, 2021), Ch. 1. Sandel made similar claims in a conversation with the economist Thomas Piketty. See: Thomas Piketty and Michael J. Sandel, *Equality: What It Is and Why It Matters* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2025), Ch. 9.

[53] Jeff Noonan, "On Tarrying with Meaninglessness," *The European Legacy* 30, no. 8 (2025): 1002–7. See also: Christina Tarnopolsky, "Melancholia and Mania on the Trump Campaign Trail," *Theory & Event* 20, no. 1 (2017): 100–128.

To these two crises, he adds a third: the "existential problematic," or a sense that existing values and ways of life are either under attack or have become defunct, leading to "religious fundamentalism and far-right populism across the world-system." This existential crisis, he claims, may be the most difficult to solve: "we know, for instance, what needs to be done to stop climate change," but "the problem of creating meaning and belonging" seems to have no evident answer.[54] Nor does this crisis of meaning, and its associated political repercussions, seem limited to Euro-American liberal democratic orders. Liberal political scientist Shadi Hamid, for example, traces how ascendant Islamist parties around the world often respond to similar demands for a meaningful politics: "many people, including outside the Middle East, are losing faith in technocratic, liberal democracy. There's a desire for a politics of substantive meaning. At the end of the day, people want more than economic tinkering."[55]

I claim that comments of this sort, from scholars with a wide range of ideological and political perspectives, indicate that the way we think about the question of meaning and politics today is strongly conditioned by a widely held *liberal exceptionalism*. By this term, I mean an assumption that liberalism is uniquely susceptible to, or uniquely unable to defend itself against, dangerous or exclusionary movements that ground a substantive meaning of politics in notions of race, nation, religion, etc. – and that liberalism is vulnerable in this way due to the inherent public

[54] Michael J. Albert, *Navigating the Polycrisis: Mapping the Futures of Capitalism and the Earth* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2024), pp. 57–60, 105–108

[55] Shadi Hamid, *Islamic Exceptionalism: How the Struggle Over Islam Is Reshaping the World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2016), pp. 211–214, 241-244. Hamid sharpened this line of analysis in an interview with Emma Green of the Atlantic: Emma Green, "The Meaningless Politics of Liberal Democracies," *The Atlantic*, June 9, 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/06/the-meaningless-politics-of-liberal-democracies/486089/.

"meaninglessness" of its neutrality and secularity. This liberal exceptionalism with respect to the question of meaning and politics contains real political and intellectual stakes.

First, liberal exceptionalism creates a false binary conception of two types of political communities: On the one hand, there is the liberal polity defined by technical adjustments or decision procedures, and which is inherently unstable due to its lack of substantive meaning; on the other hand, there is the political community, whether theocratic, monarchical, dictatorial, etc., organized around a substantive conception of the good and/or a substantive conception of the meaning and purpose of politics – and which is inherently more stable *because* it encompasses this system of meaning. This conception, I suggest, inclines some liberal theorists like Lefebvre or Church to assume that merely drawing out, creating, or recovering a substantive meaning for liberalism helps *in itself* make liberalism more resilient against hard alternatives.

Second, a widespread assumption of liberal exceptionalism also provides an easy and powerful rhetorical cudgel that legitimates and strengthens illiberal or exclusionary movements. As indicated by, for example, Vermeule, those proposing a hard alternative to liberal democracy frequently cite the meaninglessness of liberal politics as a justification of their own proposals. Indeed, Jason Blakley has pointed out that claims about the "nihilistic" character of modern culture have served as powerful rhetorical tools that fueled reactionary politics in the United States since such claims first became popular in the 1970s.[56] Liberal theorists, including many of those mentioned above, who accept as an assumption that liberalism is uniquely meaningless and thereby uniquely vulnerable to irruptions of

[56] Jason Blakely, "Nihilism as Rightwing Political Rhetoric," *Theory & Event* 22, no. 1 (2019): 92–114.

meaningful politics are thus helping to perpetuate and validate a core illiberal critique of liberalism – and helping to sustain pipelines that connect individual malaise to illiberal political movements.

This dissertation functions as both a call for and a step towards expanding our thinking about meaning and politics beyond liberal exceptionalism. Only by taking seriously a broader set of thought on the topic will we be able to understand and suitably respond to the crises of meaning that today seem to feed into reactionary politics. The first step in this process is to displace the assumptions that underpin liberal exceptionalism and recognize that crises and contests of meaning are not specific to liberalism, but are rather intrinsic to political life. Indeed, a careful reading of the figures addressed in this dissertation suggests that politics itself may be usefully defined as the *management of meaning*. Political theories and political communities are in large part defined by how they respond to the problem of meaning and politics: Liberalism in its classic formulations is arguably characterized above all by its secularism and public neutrality – the relegation of structures of meaning to the private sphere in favor of a meaningfully neutral public sphere. In contrast, Schmitt's political theory of decisionism, as we will see in Chapter 1, is characterized by its organization around an exclusive, substantive conception of existential meaning that is continually threatened by alternative meaningful frameworks, requiring constant management by the sovereign (e.g., through the declaration of internal and external enemies). Returning to and taking seriously past notions of meaning and politics, including those articulated by non-liberal writers, will both provide a broader perspective than the one suggested by liberal exceptionalism *and* provide valuable theoretical resources to help us think through problems of meaning and politics today. I suggest that the German secularization debate provides a fruitful starting point for such a project.

5. Why the German Secularization Debate?

The context of the German secularization debate was one in which questions of meaning, secularization, and politics were central in contending with developments of modern history. This discursive context was created through the convergence of a number of interconnected bodies of literature specific to Germany, including non-theistic philosophical writings, dialectical theology, and the uptake of mass society theory. This enabled the German secularization debate to both draw on and contribute to an unparalleled tradition of thought on meaning and politics, making the debate an ideal archive for thinking through these issues in our current context.

German thought has long had a unique relationship to the secular and the religious, with Hegel himself noting that there existed in Germany less "hostility" between Enlightenment and the Church than in France.[57] Moreover, within German thought, the concept of secularization was from its first days attached to questions of meaning in life, as indicated by Weber's corollary concept of disenchantment.[58] For Weber, disenchantment unequivocally involved a profound loss – albeit one that must be accepted as a consequence of the rational and scientific fruits of modernity. For others within the German tradition, however, the import of human meaning was more ambiguous. Before Weber, Nietzsche characterized the ascetic ideal, tightly intertwined with a Christian moral ethos, as providing meaning to the "meaninglessness of suffering:" This "*saved*" man, allowing him to will, but the religious meaning of the ascetic ideal enabled only a nihilistic "*will to nothingness.*"[59] And prior to

[57] G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1857), pp. 461-466

[58] Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation."

[59] Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Genealogy of Morals," in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and RJ Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), pp. 162–163

Nietzsche, Feuerbach characterized religion as the anthropomorphic projection of human capacities, attributes, and needs onto the divine. Through this, man "virtually retracts the nothingness of human activity, by making his dispositions and actions an object to God" – at the same time, however, in so doing, man alienates himself from his consciousness and being, a process of greater or lesser "self-humiliation."[60] It was therefore not just meaning in general that was central to debates around religion and politics in Germany, but the specific political implications of that meaning – as a positive, orienting, solidaristic force; as a limiting, self-defeating, dehumanizing force, etc.

This tradition of thought on religious meaning did not merely form a backdrop to the German secularization debate, but was actively taken up therein. For example, Voegelin's doctoral advisor Hans Kelsen – in his work on structural analogies between theological and state concepts, which inspired Schmitt's *Political Theology*, inaugurating the German secularization debate – draws on Feuerbach to interpret the state, like the divine, as the alienation of human powers to a supposedly separate object.[61] Similarly, Weber is a constant travelling companion in the debate, while Nietzsche is also extensively engaged at points.[62]

In addition to these predecessors, those concerned with meaning in modernity continued to publish concurrently with the German secularization debate, even if they themselves stand tangentially thereto. In 1927, Heidegger's *Being and Time* meditated on the "meaning [*Sinn*] of Being" in an

[60] Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Elliot (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1989), e.g., pp. 29–32

[61] Hans Kelsen, "God and the State," in *Essays in Legal and Moral Philosophy*, ed. Ota Weinberger, trans. Peter Heath (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1973), 61–82.

[62] e.g., Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism: Two Essays*, trans. William Fitzpatrick (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 1997), pp. 19–23

existential condition of thrownness, in which the individual and social sources of value and meaning can no longer be considered natural or a reflection of universal or transcendental truth.[63] While many readers, both contemporary and recent, have detected a lack of any political philosophy in *Being and Time*, his work did much to foreground the topic of meaning-making in a contingent and disunified world – including for one of his former students, Karl Löwith.[64] And, closer to the mid-century period, a posthumous publication by Heidegger's one-time mentor Edmund Husserl extended Weber's concept of disenchantment to diagnose a crisis of the sciences in their inability to answer "precisely the questions which man, given over in our unhappy times to the most portentous upheavals, finds the most burning: questions of the meaning or meaninglessness of the whole of this human existence."[65]

In addition, dialectical theology, which flourished in interbellum Germany and met with a much-delayed uptake elsewhere, placed questions of existential meaning within a disenchanted world at the center of theology.[66] Many dialectical theologians were also prominent public intellectuals, and

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[63] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008).

[64] On this, see: Mark Basil Tanzer, *Heidegger: Decisionism and Quietism* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2002), pp. 13–18. Of course, this apparent lack of politics was challenged by those who claimed a necessary connection between Heidegger's philosophy and his eventual turn to Nazism – as discussed in Chapter 2, Löwith himself was one of the earliest and most influential to make this claim. Richard Wolin has argued that the publication of Heidegger's *Black Notebooks* (beginning in 2014) has revealed the notion of a "*cordon sanitaire*…between 'philosophy' and 'worldview' in his oeuvre" to be "hermeneutically flawed." See: Richard Wolin, *Heidegger in Ruins: Between Philosophy and Ideology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), p. 2

[65] Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 6. Regarding Heidegger and Husserl on meaning, see: Steven Galt Crowell, *Husserl, Heidegger, and the Space of Meaning: Paths towards Transcendental Phenomenology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001).

[66] On dialectical theology, see: David W. Congdon, *The Mission of Demythologizing: Rudolf Bultmann's Dialectical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), Ch. 3, 4

some, most influentially Rudolf Bultmann, participated in the German secularization debate themselves,[67] while others served as absent interlocutors within the debate.[68]

Moreover, mass society theory – a loosely connected set of reflections on the collapse of social hierarchy and differentiation and the rise of the homogeneous "mass" as a political and social force – was a nearly ubiquitous presence in early twentieth-century Germany, particularly through the writings of crowd psychologists. While mass society theory took variegated forms, it had the effect in the German context of drawing attention not merely to the (in)stability of mass politics, but the collapse of a meaningful differentiated social order and the concomitant search for new meaning through participation in mass movements. Although mass society theory found some contemporary purchase elsewhere, in, for example, the British Pluralists, this work tended to foreground the importance of group-level intermediary organizations in mediating between state and individual,[69] a focus that also characterizes the post-WWII uptake of mass society theory within the American context.[70] The relation between meaning and mass conditions, especially in the context of mass movements, appears fleetingly, if at all.

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[67] See: Rudolf Bultmann, *History and Eschatology*.

[68] For example, Jacob Taubes, a key participant in and interpreter of the German secularization debate, showed a keen interest in dialectical theology, particularly that of Karl Barth. See: Jacob Taubes, "Theodicy and Theology: A Philosophical Analysis of Karl Barth's Dialectical Theology," *The Journal of Religion* 34, no. 4 (1954). See also: Karl Löwith, "European Nihilism: Reflections on the Spiritual and Historical Background of the European War," in *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism*, trans. Gary Steiner (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 173–284, pp. 197–198

[69] See, for example, Cécile Laborde's discussion of John Neville Figgis in her work on the British pluralists: Cécile Laborde, *Pluralist Thought and the State in Britain and France, 1900–25* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), pp. 46–58

[70] On this and the continuing influence of mass society theory's notion of intermediate organizations in current accounts of social capital, see: Irene Taviss Thomson, "The Theory That Won't Die: From Mass Society to the Decline of Social Capital," *Sociological Forum* 20, no. 3 (2005): 421–48.

In short, the convergence of multiple lines of influence worked to create a rich and wide-ranging problem-space centered on questions of meaning and secular politics and society – one that was shared not only by participants in the German secularization debate, but also by Hannah Arendt, members of the Frankfurt School, and others. Within this context, interventions centered on these issues could both draw on a tradition of prior work and blossom into a robust series of responses, debates, and iterative contributions that reached an intensity not achieved elsewhere.

For example, in the American context, Carl Becker's *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (1932) framed the Enlightenment idea of posterity as the philosophical analogue to the religious "other world," as it situates individual efforts within a broader, redemptive story of human progress, thereby granting meaning to contemporary life and, eventually, death.[71] Though Becker's account proved influential (Peter Gay, whose 1957 critique drove the book's downfall from prominence, claimed that *Heavenly City* "has done more to shape the current image of the Enlightenment than any other book"),[72] it neither intervened in nor inaugurated a broader debate in the way Schmitt's *Political Theology* had the previous decade in the German context. The same could be said for Raymond Aron's *The Opium of the Intellectuals* in the French context. While Aron's book attaches secular religion to a demand for meaning, particularly in the context of crisis,[73] its reception

[71] Carl Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), especially Ch. 3, 4

[72] Peter Gay, "Carl Becker's Heavenly City," *Political Science Quarterly* 72, no. 2 (1957): 182–99.

[73] Of crises and disasters, Aron says: "One seeks, in a slightly disingenuous way, to give them a meaning—not in the positive sense of establishing the main facts in order to understand what in fact happened, but a meaning that will provide an excuse for all the accumulated horrors…The idolatry of history is born of this unavowed nostalgia for a future which would justify the unjustifiable. See: Raymond Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, trans. Terence Kilmartin (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985), p. 192

tended to foreground his general critique of Marxism – in which case it became an "ideological switchblade, a slogan, a crib" – or his defense of liberalism.[74]

In general, secularization did not achieve in other contexts the reach and prominence it found within Germany. In the United States, which has long exhibited higher religiosity than Europe, the concept of secularization did not "appear significantly" within Sociology, a key carrier of the idea in the U.S. context, until the 1950s and did not become widely accepted until the 1970s[75] – and within this context, the term referred to the "classical" secularization thesis of the decline of religion, rather than the transformative connotations that it took on in Germany and that enabled robust reflections on the continuing role of meaning in politics. Within France, Jean-Claude Monod claimed in 2007 that "the thematic of 'the modern secularization of Christianity' is certainly less known...and less well received than in Germany."[76] In each of these contexts, once concerns about secularization and modern politics became salient, the German secularization debate served as a crucial and frequent theoretical resource.[77] Given this rich discursive context, the German secularization debate constitutes an ideal archive with which to think through questions of meaning and modern politics.

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[74] Leslie Marsh and Nathan Cockram, "The Opium of the Intellectuals," in *The Anthem Companion to Raymond Aron*, ed. Joachim Stark and Christopher Adair-Toteff (London: Anthem Press, 2022), 71–88, pp. 71–72

[75] William H. Swatos and Kevin J. Christiano, "Secularization Theory: The Course of a Concept," *Sociology of Religion* 60, no. 3 (1999): 209–28.

[76] Quoted in Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins, "French Laïcité and the Recent Reception of the German Secularization Debate into France," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 12, no. 4 (2011): 433–47, p. 436

[77] e.g., James R. Martel, *Divine Violence: Walter Benjamin and the Eschatology of Sovereignty* (New York: Routledge, 2012). On the French context, see: Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins, "French Laïcité and the Recent Reception of the German Secularization Debate into France."

6. Approach and Chapter Summaries

As mentioned above, most readings of the German secularization debate tend to interpret it as fundamentally a contest over the presence or absence of secularized theological structures or concepts in twentieth-century politics and philosophy, and therefore as a contest over the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the modern age. As a consequence, most engagements with the debate tend to focus on a defined set of texts from its canonical participants that make specific and explicit claims about the theological debt of modernity. While chronologically proximate works by the same writers are sometimes brought in for the purposes of contextualization, focus tends to land disproportionately on *Political Theology* (for Schmitt), *Political Religions* and *The New Science of Politics* (for Voegelin), and *Meaning in History* (for Löwith). Similarly, while secondary literature often juxtaposes Habermas' postsecular turn to his earlier accounts of a past religious worldview already-eclipsed by rationalization, extended engagements with Habermas' many claims about religion in his pre-postsecular work remain rare.[78]

Reframing the German secularization debate around the problem of meaning in politics provides an antidote to this attenuated uptake of these writers in relation to their role in the debate. Rather than consider as relevant only those texts with a specific type of claim (e.g., of the structure "x is a secularized y"), focusing on the dynamic of meaning and politics among and across these writers opens a much larger archive of relevant material for each one. In line with contextualist approaches à la

[78] See: Eduardo Mendieta, "Introduction," in *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2002), 1–36.

Quentin Skinner,[79] then, this dissertation approaches its subjects with the assumption that their work on any given topic can be understood only in relation to the multiple contexts they inhabit – not only a historical context comprising the multiple crises in the first half of the twentieth century or the biographical context of displacements and exiles (to which secondary literature attends well), but also the bibliographical context of their own writings. Practically, this means interrogating not only Schmitt's *Political Theology*, but also his broader Weimar-era work on the fragility of parliamentary democracy, the political power of myth, and the sources of political legitimacy and social solidarity; for Löwith, it means departing from the overwhelming focus on *Meaning in History* within secondary literature and reading his claims in that text in relation to his early critique of Schmitt's "nihilistic decisionism" and his attempt to contend with the sources of fascism in his writings on "European nihilism" – and so on for the other writers addressed in this dissertation. Adopting such an approach enables us to view each individual contribution to the German secularization debate not as a hermetically isolated meditation on the relation of religion to modern politics, but rather as one way of articulating longer-running concerns regarding the problem of meaning and politics.

Chapter 1 introduces the problem of meaning in politics through the work of the jurist, political theorist, and later Nazi ideologue Carl Schmitt, broadly agreed to be the inaugurator of the German secularization debate. I approach Schmitt's conception of meaning in politics through his account of the relationship between the sovereign and the mass. Most secondary sources tend to read Schmitt as according to the sovereign a kind of god-like omnipotence – an ability to dispose of its

[79] See, for example: Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," in *Visions of Politics: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 57–89.

subjects and break and remake the political and social order without constraint. Consequently, the sovereign decision is similarly assumed to be unconstrained and without ground – emerging from "nothingness." Against this common interpretation, I argue that, on Schmitt's account, the sovereign decision is indeed constrained: not by an existing legal order, but by pre-political "constructs of meaning" [*Sinngebungen*], which spontaneously emerge from the masses and provide an existential motivational force that is crucial to both sovereign legitimacy and collective political action. For Schmitt, an exclusive and unified substantive meaning is crucial to the stability and active footing of a state – but this unity will constantly be threatened by aberrant meaning-makers. For Schmitt, then, the problem of meaning and politics demands constant and active management by the sovereign – tweaking political form to align with an existing framework of meaning and culling alternate frameworks emerging from below (through, for example, the declaration of internal enemies).

Chapter 2 examines Karl Löwith's account of modernity as trapped within political and intellectual trends of nihilism, decisionism, existentialism, and progress narratives. Löwith was an early critic of Schmitt's "nihilistic decisionism." While recognizing the historical importance of this intervention, scholars have typically considered Löwith's engagements with Schmitt to begin and end with this 1936 article. I argue instead that Löwith's early critique of Schmitt led him to refocus his thought as a whole on the intellectual and existential background of Schmitt's decisionism and "active nihilism," culminating in *Meaning in History* and the rest of his mature work from the 1940s through the 1960s. Recovering this intellectual trajectory can shed light on Löwith's "stoic withdrawal" and lack of a positive political program, which has been widely criticized, including by Eric Voegelin and Jürgen Habermas. Specifically, Löwith's investigation into the roots of Schmitt's active nihilism and

decisionism led him to conclude that a healthy and bounded political meaning in the modern age was an impossibility due to an inescapable condition of existential groundlessness and a concomitant desire for a nihilistic-decisionist creation of new values ex nihilio. For Löwith, the problem of meaning in politics was, in every political form, insoluble – any attempt in the twentieth century to imbue politics with meaning would invite decisionistic and nihilistic fury.

Chapter 3 focuses on how Eric Voegelin adapted the categories and empirical observations of mass psychology in his diagnosis of a widespread pathological search for meaning in the twentieth century. Voegelin's key criticism of what he called "modern psychology" (including psychoanalysis and mass psychology) is that it effaces the fundamental existential human condition – an "In-Betweenness" by which humans find themselves pulled between, and able to experience, both the mundane and transcendental "poles of existence," and which generates a relentless search for ultimate meaning. Nonetheless, I claim, Voegelin reinterpreted several key concepts of mass psychology in his theorization of "gnosticism," a "pneumopathological" (disease of the spirit) orientation by which the ultimate meaning of existence is located wholly within mundane reality (e.g., as the advance of a particular nation/race, as a utopic end-state, etc.). This chapter both recovers a largely unrecognized source of Voegelin's mature thought and reconstructs his key claim with regard to meaning and politics: specifically, that a healthy (non-pneumopathological) meaning is constitutive of the political community, but that pneumopathological searches for meaning constantly threaten chaos and destruction.

Chapter 4 turns to Jürgen Habermas' writings on religion, focusing particularly on his postsecular turn circa 2001. While Habermas is not typically included as a figure within the German

secularization debate, I argue that reading him as such produces a useful perspective on his work: one focused not on whether religious and secular citizens face asymmetric burdens within liberal democracy (and how to alleviate those asymmetric burdens), but rather on the relation of meaning to politics within a context of liberal neutrality. By tracing Habermas' functional approach to his analysis of religion, I argue that his descriptive account of secularization from the 1960s to the 1980s eventually, after his postsecular turn, morphed into a normative demand for secularism. The recognition that religious meaning was still extant and operative within the liberal state, and, moreover, that such meaning was crucial to solidarity and political action, forced Habermas to partially close the openness of discourse that he had previously celebrated (and which had taken as an assumption secularization theory and the privatization of substantive meaning). Once the problem of meaning and politics becomes salient for Habermas, he is forced to treat secularism (as opposed to secularization) as an active political principle, one that contains its own substantive meaning that is capable of managing alternate systems of meaning by assessing their potential threat or contribution to this substantive conception.

Chapter 1: Mass and Sovereign – Carl Schmitt's Theory of Meaning

1. Introduction

If there exists one consensus in the variegated and often interpretively contentious literature on Carl Schmitt, it is that his Weimear-era work presents the sovereign decision as entirely unrestrained by law. For example, Paul Hirst characterizes Schmitt as counterposing a "legally unlimited" and "boundless sovereign power claimed in the name of the 'people'" to the procedures and discussions of parliamentary systems;[80] Slavoj Žižek portrays the content of the sovereign decision as "arbitrary, dependent on the Sovereign's will;"[81] John McCormick refers to the sovereign's "world-making, God-like fiat of exceptional legislative authority;"[82] and even more strongly, Sjoerd Griffioen portrays the decision as analogous to "inscrutable divine will" – an "act of creation *ex nihilo*" that "radically devalues – and almost denies – any pre-existing reality."[83]

This interpretation, of course, closely follows aspects of Schmitt's own writings – for example, he characterized the decision as emanating from "normative nothingness" both in his most firmly decisionist text and following his supposed Nazi-era break from decisionism in favor of concrete-order thinking.[84] However, as Ellen Kennedy has noted, such quotes from Schmitt on the "normative

[80] Paul Hirst, "Carl Schmitt's Decisionism," in *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London: Verso, 1999), 7–17.

[81] Slavoj Žižek, "Carl Schmitt in the Age of Post-Politics," in *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London: Verso, 1999), 18–37.

[82] John McCormick, "Introduction," in *Legality and Legitimacy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), p. xxxv

[83] Sjoerd Griffioen, *Contesting Modernity in the German Secularization Debate*, pp. 80–81

[84] Respectively: Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, pp. 31–32; Carl Schmitt, *On the Three Types of Juristic Thought*, trans. Joseph Bendersky (London: Praeger, 2004), p. 62

nothingness" from which the sovereign decision emerges often appear in secondary literature without the "normative" qualification,[85] implying not just independence from pre-existing law, but independence from all constraints. In some cases, this notion of the Schmittian sovereign decision as based in nothing but arbitrary will has led some interpreters, such as Giorgio Agamben and Renato Cristi, to identify Schmitt's own position with those of the Catholic counter-revolutionaries who serve as his frequent interlocutors.[86] Contemporary commentators leaned into similar claims, with Schmitt's friend Erik Peterson proclaiming in 1935 that a Christian-Schmittian political theology was impossible, as trinitarian theology disallows the one-to-one correspondence between a single monarch and a single God.[87]

That Schmittian decisionism grants the sovereign independence from normative, legal restraints is undeniable. However, it does not follow that the decision is therefore wholly unconditional and arbitrary. Indeed, the legal transcendence of the sovereign is only one-half of the problem of sovereignty that Schmitt sets out in *Political Theology*. In Chapter 2 of this text, Schmitt attacks Hans Kelsen and his positivist colleagues in part for their separation of jurisprudence and sociology in the process of constructing a purely formal and purely normative theory of law: "To obtain in unadulterated purity a system of ascriptions to norms and a last uniform basic norm, all

[85] Ellen Kennedy, *Constitutional Failure: Carl Schmitt in Weimar* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), pp. 85–86

[86] Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 57; Renato Cristi, *Carl Schmitt and Authoritarian Liberalism: Strong State, Free Economy* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998), pp. 112–113

[87] Erik Peterson, "Monotheism as a Political Problem." None other than Schmitt himself rejected such accounts – in *Political Theology II*, largely a response to Peterson's essay, he claims that political theology is not oriented to monarchy per se, but to "political unity and its presence or representation." In an age of democratic legitimacy, the formula is no longer "One God – One King, but: One God – One People." Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology II,* p. 72

sociological elements have been left out of the juristic concept. The old contrast between *is* and *ought*, between causal and normative considerations, has been transferred to the contrast of sociology and jurisprudence."[88] Within the context of the chapter, this opens Schmitt's key critique of positivist jurisprudence: that in seeking to eliminate the sovereign, and thus the decision, it has forgotten that norms *always* require individual persons and individual decisions in their implementation. However, considered in the context of the book as a whole, Kelsen's splitting of sociology and jurisprudence also stands as a negative counterpoint to Schmitt's own "sociology of juristic concepts" – particularly of the concept of sovereignty that occupies the third and fourth chapters. If Kelsen's purely juristic theory of law ignores the problem of the "realization of law," this problem occupies much of Schmitt's own focus. And in relation to the concept of sovereignty, the problem is not an abstract definition of sovereignty within a hierarchical system of norms and their ascriptions à la Kelsen, but how sovereignty can appear and act within a concrete social and metaphysical order – "The connection of actual power with the legally highest power is the fundamental problem of the concept of sovereignty."[89]

Interpretations of Schmitt that view the sovereign decision as legally unrestrained, ungrounded, and emanating from a "normative nothingness" only address half the question. From a jurisprudential perspective, the decision – and hence the sovereign himself – is indeed unrestrained, with even patently false and arbitrary decisions attaining the status of legality.[90] However, it will be the

[88] Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 18

[89] Ibid.

[90] Ibid., p. 31

contention of this chapter that from a "sociological" perspective, the Schmittian sovereign is profoundly constrained by a pre-existing order – considered not as a normative legal order, but an order of *meaning* held by the masses, with which the sovereign must align and over which he possesses only limited control.

The role of the masses in generating and enforcing the "systems of meaning" that suggest the proper form of politics, the substantive values embodied in a political order, and even the determination of friends and enemies indicates that the Schmittian sovereign occupies a much more precarious and constrained position than is typically recognized. Moreover, it is precisely these mass systems of meaning that lie at the heart of Schmitt's critique of liberalism, which he views as having privatized all meaning, beginning with religion, rendering it susceptible to political instability, unwilling to take action against hostile forces, and incapable of engaging in true politics. Only by attending to the often-overlooked role of the masses in Schmitt' s work does the full scope of his notions of politics, decisionism, and liberalism emerge. In other words, whereas most interpretations read Schmitt "from above, from the powers that be,"[91] I seek to read Schmitt from the bottom up.

1.1 Outline

In this chapter, I provide an interpretation of Schmitt's theory of the relation of "systems of meaning" to politics, focusing largely on his Weimar-era work. Section 2 establishes Schmitt's notion of meaning, which for him is always collective (rather than private à la his account of liberalism), politically active as a source of stability in normal times and a motive for warfare in exceptional times,

[91] Jacob Taubes, "Carl Schmitt: Apocalyptic Prophet of the Counterrevolution," in *To Carl Schmitt: Letters and Reflections*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 1–18, p. 13

and always in reference to a system of belief and purpose generated and held by the masses, rather than the elite. Section 3 takes this account of meaning and uses it as a lens through which to read *Political Theology* and *Concept of the Political*. I argue that the presence of mass systems of meaning that precede the sovereign severely constrains, yet does not eliminate, the discretion of the sovereign decision regarding both political form and the designation of friends and enemies. Finally, Section 4 turns to the possibility of irruptions of mass meaning from below, arguing that Schmitt's publicization of all systems of meaning – and hence their designation as valid targets of political action – forms a polemical counterpoint to his characterization of liberalism as privatizing all meaning and hence as incapable of properly managing its public appearance, leading to both political instability and nihilistic wars of total destruction.

Within the context of the dissertation, this chapter serves two primary functions. First, it establishes a critique of liberalism centered on its handling of human meaning that will frame both my own comments in the conclusion as well as the response to the problem of meaning in politics given by Jürgen Habermas – who, in his post-secular era, attempted to overcome this liberal privatization of meaning through the selective inclusion of religious claims in public discourse. Second, it establishes Schmitt's account of the role of mass meaning within politics and the delicate balancing act required of political actors in navigating this – as I touch on in the conclusion, later writers like Eric Voegelin and Karl Löwith challenge various aspects of this account, denying the feasibility of properly regulating such systems of meaning within a pluralistic world, or denying them a proper role in politics all together.

2. Carl Schmitt and Meaning

Owing to the epigrammatic and frequently cryptic style of Schmitt's work that bedevils any attempt at systematic clarification, interpretations of the role of meaning for Schmitt are quite varied. On one side lies the argument that what Reinhart Koselleck calls the "political formalism" of Schmitt's writing[92] – the identification of basic structures (most famously, friend and enemy) that disregard questions of substance – makes Schmitt's theories a form of extreme relativism or nihilism, such that the actual content of a decision, order, or political form is removed from evaluation and elevated to a position of ultimate import. Karl Löwith launched this line of interpretation in a 1935 essay, arguing that Schmitt's Weimar texts constituted an "unromantic-decisionistic" form of occasionalism – a term of derision that Schmitt had previously leveled at "political romanticism"[93] – which amounts to nothing more than the "active nihilism" of a "decision in favor of decisiveness."[94] Jan-Werner Müller continues this characterization, describing Schmitt as an "occasional nationalist,"[95] while Andrew Norris similarly notes that Schmitt's attempt to overcome the nihilistic tenor of his age "in which meaning...is ebbing away" is "clearly compatible with the nihilistic frenzy" of senseless ethnic conflict.[96]

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[92] Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 190–191

[93] Carl Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, trans. Guy Oakes (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986). See the discussion of political romanticism below in this chapter.

[94] Karl Löwith, "The Occasional Decisionism of Carl Schmitt," in *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism*, trans. Gary Steiner (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 137–72.

[95] Jan-Werner Müller, "Carl Schmitt—An Occasional Nationalist?," *History of European Ideas* 23, no. 1 (1997): 19–34.

[96] Andrew Norris, "Carl Schmitt on Friends, Enemies, and the Political," *Telos*, no. 112 (1998): 68–88.

On the other side lies the claim that Schmitt remained profoundly concerned with meaning in general (as opposed to advocating one particular substantive idea thereof) and how it can be produced or safeguarded by politics. Leo Strauss inaugurated this strain of interpretation with his "Notes on Carl Schmitt." Because the political encompasses "what men quarrel about,"so Strauss' argument goes, it is "dependent upon what ultimately matters for man" – the threat to the political posed by liberalism is therefore a threat to the "seriousness of life." Schmitt lambasts the attempt to find a genuinely apolitical, neutral space not merely as an intellectual error or political impossibility, but an existential wrong: such a space is possible only "at the cost of the meaning of human life."[97]

Within subsequent work, the claim of meaning's centrality to the political often intersects with the authority of the sovereign to determine this space, and thus to generate the very meaning central to it. Johanna Jacques and Sarah Pourciau, for example, each in different ways frame Schmitt's politics as a "struggle for meaning," with the sovereign decision serving to establish or generate this meaning *ex nihilo*.[98] John McCormick connects this meaning-making function of politics to Schmitt's critique of technical thinking: Faced with a rationalizing force that "saps the world of meaning," Schmitt aims to recover the depth and seriousness of politics by "infus[ing] the technologically disenchanted world with meaning through…the 'friend/enemy' distinction."[99] Each of these

[97] Leo Strauss, "Notes on Carl Schmitt, the Concept of the Political," in *The Concept of the Political*, trans. Harvey J. Lomax (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 97–122.

[98] Johanna Jacques, "Law, Decision, Necessity: Shifting the Burden of Responsibility," in *The Contemporary Relevance of Carl Schmitt: Law, Politics, Theology*, ed. Matilda Arvidsson, Leila Brännström, and Panu Minkkinen (New York: Routledge, 2016), 107–19; Sarah Pourciau, "Bodily Negation: Carl Schmitt on the Meaning of Meaning," *MLN* 120, no. 5 (2005): 1066–90. Quote from Jacques.

[99] John P. McCormick, *Carl Schmitt's Critique of Liberalism: Against Politics as Technology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), especially pp. 18–19, 73–100

interpretations illuminates important and useful aspects of meaning for Schmitt, but each also aligns with the tendency to read Schmitt solely as a top-down thinker, amplifying the role of the elite and sovereign in creating and safeguarding meaning and minimizing that of the masses.

The formal quality of Schmitt's writing diminished as his involvement with the Nazi Party intensified. The supposedly once-empty categories of friend and enemy (for example) became filled in with the substance of Nazi ideology – the abstract notion of homogeneity required for true representation became a *völkisch* cultural and ethno-racial homogeneity, such that "an absolute ethnic identity between leader and following" became "the foundation of the political leadership of the German people," with the carriers of an "alien-transmitted will" in matters of politics, law, and culture being designated as enemies of the *Volk*.[100] Some have drawn on this shift in order to bridge Schmitt's different notions of meaning through a pre- and post-Nazification periodization of Schmitt's work: either by proclaiming a total split between the two periods – which Ellen Kennedy notes is particularly prevalent among liberals and leftists who wish to rehabilitate Weimar Schmitt[101] – or by claiming that Schmitt's shift is one of degree rather than kind, and that both nihilistic decisionism and substantive, concrete-order populist authoritarianism are each always present in his work. In this vein, Richard Wolin views Schmitt's concrete-order thinking as a combination of two preexisting themes in his work – the decision made "ex nihilo – in total disregard of the culturally dominant value paradigms," and a

[100] Carl Schmitt, *State, Movement, People: The Triadic Structure of Political Unity*, trans. Simona Draghici (Corvallis: Plutarch Press, 2001), p. 48; see also: Carl Schmitt, "The Führer Protects the Law," in *The Third Reich Sourcebook*, ed. Anson Rabinbach and Sander Gilman, trans. Timothy Nunan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 63–67.

[101] Ellen Kennedy, *Constitutional Failure*, p. xxx; William Scheuerman adds that this was also useful to Schmitt after 1933 in emphasizing the newly "National Socialist character of his theory." See: William E. Scheuerman, *The End of Law: Carl Schmitt in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), p. 160

concern with the "concrete philosophy of order." If in his decisionist mode, Schmitt "consciously abandons all higher questions about the meaning of political life" in his concrete-order thinking, the *Volk* becomes (in an occasionalist fashion) the existential and cultural basis for the sovereign decision.[102] While this type of periodization foregrounds crucial continuities and divergences between Weimar and Nazi-era Schmitt, in both its forms, it tends to overstate the unconditioned nature of the decision in Weimar Schmitt and minimize or occlude the role of the masses, whom Schmitt always saw as existing in constitutive tension with the sovereign decision.

Schmitt's occasionalism cannot be denied, nor can the way his formalistic prose implies an apparent "lack [of] substantial ethical standards beyond politics."[103] However, Schmitt consistently, if abstractly, emphasized the importance of meaning to politics. In *Legality and Legitimacy*, he contrasts the two halves of the Constitution of the Weimar Republic – the purely formal (and purely liberal) First Chapter (Articles 1–108), delineating the forms and procedures of the constitutional state, and the "system of meaning" of the Second Chapter (Articles 109–165), articulating the "Fundamental Rights and Duties of Germans." If forced to choose between Weimar's "two constitutions," Schmitt unequivocally opts for the "second constitution and its attempt to establish a substantive order."[104] Indeed, as we will see, Schmitt positions a unified, collective, and public system of meaning as a *sine qua non* of both political action and political stability.

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[102] Richard Wolin, "Carl Schmitt, Political Existentialism, and the Total State," *Theory and Society* 19, no. 4 (1990): 389–416.

[103] Paul Hirst, "Carl Schmitt's Decisionism," p. 8

[104] Carl Schmitt, *Legality and Legitimacy*, pp. 46–47, 94

Schmitt frequently describes what he at points calls "constructs of meaning"[105] or "systems of meaning" as religions (e.g., of socialism, humanity, privacy, technicity, etc.) or as myths. The implications of using such terms is made murkier by the ambiguous relationship between Schmitt's work and Catholic theology. While Schmitt's affinity for Catholic political symbolism and theories of representation in *Political Theology* and *Roman Catholicism and Political Form* have been noted at least since dadaist poet Hugo Ball's 1924 essay,[106] the theological or non-theological nature of his subsequent work remains a live question. Those arguing for a strong theological interpretation of Schmitt's corpus claim that Schmitt's religious grounding only ever shifted from exoteric to esoteric rather than vanishing entirely.[107]

In response, those on the non-theological side of the debate such as John McCormick and Aaron Roberts tend to argue that Schmitt's grounding in Catholicism was limited to a relatively brief period of his work that culminated in the early 1920s, pointing to his comments on "superficial secularizations" in *Concept of the Political,*[108] his 1926 excommunication from the Catholic Church,

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[105] Carl Schmitt, "Three Possibilities for a Christian Conception of History," trans. Mario Wenning, *Telos*, no. 147 (2009): 167–70.

[106] Hugo Ball, "Carl Schmitt's Political Theology," trans. Matthew Vollgraff, *October* 146 (2013): 65–92.

[107] Heinrich Meier is still arguably the most prominent proponent of the strong interpretation of Schmitt as a political theologian. See: Heinrich Meier, *Carl Schmitt & Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue*, trans. J. Harvey Lomax (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). As a weaker version of this theological interpretation, other scholars point to the persistent theme of sacredness in connection with land, law, and legitimacy in Schmitt's post-war work, as well as his notion of "katechon" as a restraining force against apocalypse, suggesting that Schmitt continued to be oriented towards religion, even if not derived directly from Catholic theology. See: Mika Ojakangas, "Carl Schmitt and the Sacred Origins of Law," *Telos* 2009, no. 147 (2009): 34–54; Jon Wittrock, "Processes of Order and the Concreteness of the Sacred: On the Contemporary Relevance of Carl Schmitt's Critique of Nihilism," in *The Contemporary Relevance of Carl Schmitt: Law, Politics, Theology*, ed. Matilda Arvidsson, Leila Brännström, and Panu Minkkinen (New York: Routledge, 2016), 195–207; Julia Hell, "*Katechon* : Carl Schmitt's Imperial Theology and the Ruins of the Future," *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory* 84, no. 4 (2009): 283–326; Philip A. Michelbach and Andrew Poe, "Carl Schmitt's Enemies: Context for a Critique of Political Theology," *Theory & Event* 25, no. 2 (2022): 444–69.

[108] Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp. 42–43

and the dubious esotericism into which interpreters frequently lapse when pursuing Schmitt's theological foundations.[109] Bruno Godefroy has recently extended this skepticism to Schmitt's early 1920s output, arguing that political theology is "theology" only in a functionalist sense, providing an "aura to authority," analogous to divine dispensation.[110]

I focus not on the existence or lack thereof of a strong Catholic theological basis for Schmitt's writings, but rather on his use of religion as a concept. For Max Weber – arguably Schmitt's greatest influence, a fact that has caused no small amount of controversy regarding the legacy of the latter[111] – the decline of religion eliminated unified frameworks of interpretation, fracturing and individualizing human meaning such that each individual "finds and obeys the daemon that holds the threads of *his* life."[112] While for Weber, meaning in modernity was necessarily individual and private – indeed, he viewed any attempt to create a "substitute" or "surrogate" for the collective meaning-making role of religion to be not only futile, but also "fraud or self-deception" – Schmitt holds that meaning must be

[109] John P. McCormick, "Political Theory and Political Theology: The Second Wave of Carl Schmitt in English," *Political Theory* 26, no. 6 (1998): 830–54; Aaron B. Roberts, "Carl Schmitt—Political Theologian?," *The Review of Politics* 77, no. 3 (2015): 449–74.

[110] Bruno Godefroy, "Carl Schmitt's Political Theology: Legitimizing Authority After Secularization," *Political Theory* 53, no. 1 (2024): 83–109.

[111] Wolfgang Mommsen in 1959 included Schmitt in Weber's legacy, seeing in Weber's celebration of plebescitary leadership democracy and its popularly elected *Reichspräsident* the inspiration for Schmitt's Weimar-era critiques of liberalism and eventual support of Hitler's leadership – a "conceptually consistent extension of Weber's own program," though one that Weber himself might not recognize as such. In 1964, in the shadow of Mommsen's book, Habermas famously described Schmitt as Weber's "legitimate pupil" at the Fifteenth Convention of the German Sociological Association. See: Wolfgang Mommsen, *Max Weber and German Politics: 1890–1920*, trans. Michael Steinberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 381–389; Otto Stammler, ed., *Max Weber and Sociology Today*, trans. Kathleen Morris (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 66; Kjell Engelbrekt, "What Carl Schmitt Picked up in Weber's Seminar: A Historical Controversy Revisited," *The European Legacy* 14, no. 6 (2009): 667–84

[112] Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation."

public and collective. For Schmitt, Catholicism was genuinely catholic – "the universal Church"[113] – and he acknowledged that the loss of this catholicity in the Reformation and Wars of Religion meant the fragmentation of those frameworks of meaning that provide purpose to individual or specialized human activity. But only within liberalism, Schmitt claims, did meaning become individualized and privatized – elsewhere, in the wake of the schism, new "religions" emerged that provided new collective frameworks of meaning. The loss of universality, however, necessitates that these religions exist in a context of pluralism, leaving little to distinguish them from any other system of meaning. Schmitt interchangeably uses terms like "religion," "pseudo-religion," "anti-religion," "myth," and "pseudo-theological...myth" – the implication being that while Catholicism was catholic, the new religions are plural: they are now, like "every myth...polytheistic:"[114] sharing space with and sometimes combatting other new religions, other myths. Schmitt's ambiguous and inconsistent use of "religion" to describe modern systems of meaning does not denote any particular interest or grounding in theology, but reflects that the collective meaning-making role of religion has not vanished, but rather has been dispersed into a set of new structures that may with equal plausibility be called "religions," "myths," or "constructs of meaning."

2.1 Meaning, Mass, Politics

In this sub-section, I establish Schmitt's account of meaning, primarily through a reading of his 1929 essay "The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations" (hereafter, "Neutralizations"),

[113] Carl Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, trans. G. L. Ulmen (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996), p. 35

[114] Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. Ellen Kennedy (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), p. 76

which was included in the second edition of *Concept of the Political*, as well as Schmitt's engagement with myth in *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*. I argue that for Schmitt, meaning possesses three crucial qualities. (1) Meaning is always properly collective; as a result (2) meaning is always political, both impelling political action and supporting the stability of the state; and (3) the political importance of meaning for Schmitt is *always* located in the masses and their systems of "mass belief" that condition the actions they are willing and able to take and the political programs that they are willing to accept.

Thematically, "Neutralizations" stands between *Political Theology* and *Concept of the Political*, reproducing with some variation the periodized shifts in political and intellectual structures in the former text and combining this with the focus on friend-enemy distinctions of the political in the latter text. Schmitt's core claim here involves a series of developments in European history since the sixteenth century. The "central domain" of life, Schmitt claims, has transitioned from theology in the sixteenth century to metaphysics in the eighteenth, economics in the nineteenth, and technology in the twentieth. These central domains in their respective centuries represent the center of gravity of elite intellectual thinking and constitute the point of reference for all other questions: "If a domain of thought becomes central, then the problems of other domains are solved in terms of the central domain."[115]

The shifting of central domains is driven by a desire for a neutral, depoliticized sphere of life – a domain in which "there would be no conflict and they could reach common agreement through

[115] Carl Schmitt, "The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations," in *The Concept of the Political*, trans. Matthias Konzett and John P. McCormick (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 80–96, p. 86

debates and exchanges of opinion." The desire for a neutral domain itself emerged in the shadow of the Wars of Religion – following these destructive and insoluble conflicts, religion as a source of public enmity was shifted into the private realm, and the central domain shifted into a purportedly "'natural' system of theology, metaphysics, morality, and law." When this metaphysics was shown to be neither neutral nor depoliticized, but perfectly capable of drawing friend-enemy distinctions, the central domain shifted once again, always in search of a truly neutral ground that could forestall armed conflict.[116]

This search for neutrality has reached its culmination today, Schmitt says, in a curious dual development. First, the traditional role of the intellectual elite has vanished within the twentieth-century "age of technology." Drawing from Julien Benda's *The Treason of the Intellectuals*, a diatribe against an elite class that neglects the duty of mass leadership,[117] Schmitt traces the shifting meaning across changes in central domain of the elite "clerc – the typical representative of intellect and publicity" – who appears as the "theologian and preacher" in an era of theological supremacy, becomes in the metaphysical seventeenth century a "scholarly systematizer" who is "far removed from the masses," and eventually vanishes all together in the age of technology. The instrumentality of technology – the fact that it is "culturally blind" and equally of use to all politics – means that it is unable to produce the substance that past central domains once did. Technology does not produce "a type of clerc or spiritual leader, nor a specific political system." Schmitt here rejects the notion of a

[116] Ibid., pp. 89–90

[117] On this, see Gopal Balakrishnan, *The Enemy: An Intellectual Portrait of Carl Schmitt* (London: Verso, 2000), pp. 127–129

technical elite proposed by Saint-Simon and others – if implemented, he claims, these constructions could only create a leaderless and directionless order. As it, like all concepts, must relate to the central domain of life, genuine elite leadership has vanished in an age of technology – politically, what is left is the liberal neutral state adhering to debate and compromise and the socialist state predicated on ineluctable technology progress.[118]

Second, with the disappearance of elite leadership, a "religion of technicity" has emerged among the masses. Seeking "radical results" and a totally neutralized and depoliticized domain, the masses see in the instrumentality of technology a source of salvation from conflict and discord. They await a "human paradise," secure in the belief that the relentless advance of technology will solve all human problems, produce a condition of "universal peace," and perfect humanity through a "magical" link between technology and morality. This "religious belief in technology" is, for Schmitt, a distinct product of the absence of leadership. Importantly, while the elite clerc itself vanished in the age of technology, the relation between elite and mass had already begun to break down. The preacher of the theological sixteenth century, in his proximity to the faithful, was replaced by the scholar and "Enlightenment authors" of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – clercs who were isolated in aristocratic and academic enclaves. Because of this, the masses in the twentieth century "skipped all intermediary stages," leaping directly from a religion of "miracles and an afterlife" into a "religion of technical miracles." While the elite underwent a "secularization" in the nineteenth century under the influence of both romanticism and economism, which stripped away magical, theological elements of

[118] Carl Schmitt, "The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations," pp. 89–94

their thought, the masses directly transposed the framework of religion into technology – their magical religiosity made of technology a new god, and of technological progress a new path to peace and paradise.[119] The religion of technicity therefore appears as a system of "mass belief" in the power of technology to produce genuine depoliticization and an earthly paradise and which emerges in the interplay between technological advancement and an absence of elite leadership.

Schmitt introduces the religion of technology in "Neutralizations" specifically to counter the claim that the age of technology is "soulless" and "meaningless." He rejects the "cultural pessimism" of those who see only "cultural or social nothingness" in the relentless advancement of technology. The "religion of technicity [must not] be confused with technology itself" – it is "still spirit" which cannot "be dismissed as mechanistic." While the intellectual elite bemoaned the evacuation of meaning from the age, the masses generated out of themselves a new meaningful framework – a "mass religion...await[ing] human paradise."[120]

The substance and meaning of these mass beliefs cannot be ignored by any modern politics because, as Schmitt frequently claimed, modern politics must accept a democratic paradigm. In *Legality and Legitimacy*, for example, he distinguishes between two sources of legitimacy: Dynastic legitimacy, associated with monarchy, is predicated on traditional authority and the legitimacy (as opposed to bastardry) of an heir.[121] In the last two centuries, however, this source of legitimacy has

[119] Carl Schmitt, "Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations," pp. 85–95

[120] Ibid., pp. 81–82, 92–94

[121] On the relationship between hereditary legitimacy and political legitimacy, see: See: Pedro C. Magalhães, *The Legitimacy of Modern Democracy: A Study on the Political Thought of Max Weber, Carl Schmitt and Hans Kelsen* (New York: Routledge, 2021), pp. 6–12

been wholly supplanted by democratic legitimacy – the substantive identity of a ruler with a homogenous people and the locating of constitutive power solely in the latter. While liberal-parliamentary systems attempt to create "a thoroughly distinctive system of justification" through their adherence to pre-established procedures and norms, this system of mere legality is in constant conflict with democratic legitimacy – not only because of the presence of a plebescitary leader, but also due to the necessity of democratic legitimacy itself.[122] This distinction between dynastic and democratic legitimacy and the modern predominance of the latter appears in much the same form in *Constitutional Theory*[123] and, as we will see later, is in essence identical to the shifting metaphysics of legitimacy Schmitt discusses in *Political Theology*.

Mass frameworks of meaning therefore cannot be ignored by politics because what the masses within a particular state *do* (i.e. accept or reject through acclamation the legitimacy of a leader or the validity of a particular order) crucially determines both the substance and stability of that state. And what the masses do is conditioned by their framework of meaning. On this point, Schmitt again draws on Weber, who, as mentioned in the introduction, viewed the motivational force of human meaning as central to political action. Similarly, for Schmitt, an understanding of mass frameworks of meaning is crucial in an age of democratic legitimacy in which the actions and beliefs of the masses may stabilize or destabilize the state.

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[122] Carl Schmitt, *Legality and Legitimacy*, trans. Jeffrey Seitzer (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), e.g., pp. 3–10, 63–66, 95–97

[123] Carl Schmitt, *Constitutional Theory*, trans. Jeffrey Seitzer (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), e.g., pp. 126–139

This dynamic comes through clearly in *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*. Schmitt's core argument in this text is well-known: the modern alliance between parliamentarism and democracy has occluded their fundamentally opposed principles and presuppositions. The durable principle of parliamentarism, distinct from transient, ad hoc, pragmatic justifications, lies in an opposition of opinions, manifested in the openness and public discussion of parliament itself. In contrast, the durable principle of democracy is the homogeneity of the people, manifested in a "series of identities:" between governed and governing, people and their representatives, state and law, and the will of the people with justice – identities that are not part of "palpable reality, but rest on a recognition of the identity." These principles constitute the *sine qua non* of their respective governing forms: should these principles come to be seen as outdated, defunct, or inapplicable to current situations, then the institution dies, even if the shell of its "empty apparatus" persists for a time. Liberal parliamentarism and democracy allied together in opposition to monarchical absolutism, but "as soon as it achieves power, liberal democracy must decide between its elements." The scales, Schmitt implies, tipped in favor of parliamentarism, with politics proceeding through a division of powers, private ballots, representatives who remain "independent of [their] constituents," and a creed of universal equality and individualism – all of which are antithetical to the series of identities and homogeneity of the (national) people that constitute the fundamental principles of democracy.[124]

The crisis of parliamentarism stems not just from its mis-matched imbrication with the structure of democratic legitimacy, but also from the erosion of the openness and public discussion

[124] Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, pp. 3–26

that constitute the fundamental principles of parliamentarism itself. The rise of party politics and the economistic reduction of opinions to interests has stripped parliamentarism of "its previous foundation and its meaning," rendering it an "empty formality." Discussion centered on determining truth or justice through opposing opinions within public space becomes a series of compromises between two sets of economic or political interests, worked out within the closed space of committee rooms and party meetings. For Schmitt, the intellectual principles of parliamentarism seemed inapplicable to the concrete reality of the Weimar Republic's liberal-parlimentary form of governance, leaving only functional-pragmatic justifications or negative arguments that it constituted the "lesser evil" between Bolshevism and Fascism. Once Parliamentarism loses these intellectual foundations and changes from "an institution of evident truth into a simply practical-technical means," its collapse can be instigated merely by the awareness that "things could be otherwise."[125]

In the final chapter of the text, Schmitt draws on Georges Sorel in order to point to "the most powerful symptom of the decline of the relative rationalism of parliamentary thought" – the rise of myth as an "irrationalist" force that is opposed to the reason of discussion and utopic construction but that nonetheless serves as the decisive motive of collective action:

> "The ability to act and the capacity for heroism, all world-historical activities reside, according to Sorel, in the power of myth. Examples of such myths are the Greek's conception of fame and of a great name, the expectation of the Last Judgement in ancient Christianity, the belief in 'vertu' and in revolutionary freedom during the French Revolution, and the national enthusiasm of the German war for liberation in 1813. Only in myth can the criterion be found for deciding whether one nation or a social group has a historical mission and has reached its historical moment...In direct

[125] Ibid., pp. 2–8, 50–76

> intuition, the enthusiastic mass creates a mythical image that pushes its energy forward and gives it the strength for martyrdom as well as the courage to use force."[126]

As in *The Concept of the Political* (see next section), the real possibility of killing and being killed stands as the highest demand one can make of another human – it thus requires motive, justification: a narrative or framework within which concrete conflict becomes sensible and meaningful. The presence of such a motive for the use of force is necessary not just in moments of great transformation and upheaval, but perpetually, as a crucial element of the maintenance of a collective entity: "Where [myth] is lacking, no social and political power can remain standing."[127]

Importantly, these myths – motive and justification for conflict – emerge not through an independent sovereign decision, but from the energies and beliefs of the masses. Myth, unlike rational utopic constructions, "has arisen out of the masses...not as a construction of intellectuals and literati." Political and intellectual elites may at most deepen the already-existing mythical energies of the masses, as when "the construction of the bourgeois by means of Hegelian dialectic" created "an image of the enemy that was capable of intensifying all the emotion of hatred and contempt" – but as myth constitutes a vitalist impulse opposed to academic constructions, its "momentum must come from the masses themselves."[128]

On all this, Schmitt and Sorel are in agreement. Where they break is in their assessments of the modern center of gravity of myth. Sorel believed that only the "socialist masses" possessed a genuinely

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[126] Ibid., p. 68

[127] Ibid.

[128] Ibid., pp. 69–73

efficacious myth – a myth that would eventually enable it to triumph in Russia. For Schmitt, even this triumph of the myth of class consciousness "contained strong nationalist elements." The Revolution was a victory for Russia rather than for the proletariat – it "made Russia Muscovite again" by standing against bourgeois forces considered not only in economic terms, but national ones: The Revolution was a rejection of "the Europeanized upper classes who held their own land in contempt." This is indicative, Schmitt says, of the dominance of the national myth over the socialist myth – or indeed, any other contemporary myth: "The more naturalistic conceptions of race and descent…the speech, tradition, and consciousness of a shared culture and education, the awareness of belonging to a community with a common fate or destiny, a sensibility of being different from other nations – all of that tends toward a national rather than a class consciousness today." With the masses standing as the sole force possessing the immediacy of life and vitalist impulses to engage in myth-making, no sovereign decision nor intellectual construction can alter the social fact of the dominance of nationalist myth – no "mechanical apparatus can build a dam if a new storm of historical life has broken loose."[129]

Impelled and guided by frameworks of meaning of their own creation, to what extent are the masses genuinely controllable by the elite – by the sovereign decider above all? Schmitt's answer to this seems ambiguous. In "Neutralizations," he claims that "Today, technical inventions are the means of the domination of the masses" and later makes reference to "the psycho-technical machinery of mass suggestion"[130] – while he seems to have in mind mass communications technology itself (radio and

[129] Ibid., pp. 68, 74–75

[130] Carl Schmitt, "The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations," pp. 92, 95

film are mentioned explicitly), it seems plausible that an understanding of the "religion of technology" may assist with these efforts. *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* arguably presents the masses in their most powerful form within at least Schmitt's Weimar writings. Even in this text, however, he discusses how the "masses are won over through a propaganda apparatus,[131] though here, as in *Concept of the Political*,[132] propaganda is presented as a tool specific to liberal-parlimentary systems that lack the substantial homogeneity required by democratic legitimacy.

If *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* presents the masses as the engine of history to the (apparent) exclusion of elite control outside of liberal-parlimentary systems, then "Three Possibilities for a Christian Conception of History" (1950) represents the opposite perspective. Here, the center stage is occupied by the elite – those who "attempt to unite the masses behind their plans." Reiterating points from his 1929 essay, Schmitt again notes that the neutrality of technology – its usability by any political form or movement – provides all with devastating "means of extermination," but the question of the enemy, the question of to "what kind of people these means are to be reasonably applied," is not answered by technology itself. Rather, at this point, Schmitt locates this power in the philosophy of history – it is only "historico-philosphical constructs of meaning" [*Sinngebungen*] that can adequately justify enmity and hence the possibility of warfare. Through the use of historical narrative, the "steering elites" construct mass propaganda in order to support their goals, as "Any faith

[131] Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, pp. 6

[132] Carl Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, pp. 71–72: "Ethical or moral pathos and materialist economic reality combine in every typical liberal manifestation and give every political concept a double face…A politically united people becomes, on the one hand, a culturally interested public, and, on the other, partially an industrial concern and its employers, partially a mass of consumers. At the intellectual pole, government and power turns into propaganda and mass manipulation, and at the economic pole, control."

of the masses is only the faith" of being on the "right side of things to come."[133] The myths in *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* that supply "the criterion…for deciding whether one nation or a social group has a historical mission and has reached its historical moment" reappear here, in substance if not in name, as historically oriented "constructs of meaning" that stand as the only justification and motivation for political action. This time, however, the elites are running the show, using these meaningful frameworks as elements of mass propaganda – a phenomenon not restricted to liberal-parlimentary systems in this piece.

A similar shift, albeit with the opposite polarity, occurs in *Ex Captivitate Salus*. Here, Schmitt presents his own Hegelian conception of the enemy as that which constitutes the self through mutual recognition ("One categorizes oneself through one's enemy") as a conception that is "not very appropriate for an age of the masses with pseudo-theological enemy myths," which treat the enemy as "something that must be destroyed."[134] Importantly, Schmitt here reproduces his criticism of the liberal-humanitarian moralization of politics in *Concept of the Political* – the framing of the opponent as the "enemy of humanity" who "must not only be defeated but also utterly destroyed"[135] – but in this post-war piece, he associates this attitude not with liberalism, but with the anti-liberal myths he celebrated in *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*. Shifts in his explicit criticism of liberalism aside, action-motivating myths are here again placed back into the hands of the masses who seem to possess

[133] Carl Schmitt, "Three Possibilities for a Christian Conception of History," pp. 167–168

[134] Carl Schmitt, *Ex Captivitate Salus: Experiences, 1945–1947,* ed. Andreas Kalyvas and Federico Finchelstein, trans. Matthew Hannah (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2017), pp. 70–71

[135] Carl Schmit, *Concept of the Political*, e.g., pp. 36–37, 54

the power to obstruct genuine politics grounded in the sovereign declaration of enmity as a mutually constitutive *hostis* rather than a providential enemy that must be destroyed.

The relationship between mass systems of meaning and elite control therefore remains ambiguous, shifting inconsistently over time and even within the same text. Rather than try to discern an underlying unity to these comments, I take Schmitt's ambiguity on this point to reflect what is, for him, a genuine indeterminability on the relation between mass and elite. The elite, the sovereign above all, does not appear as a kite made to dance in the capricious gales of mass belief; but neither do the masses appear as the passive tools of an arbitrary and unconstrained sovereign will. Politics instead emerges as a constant negotiation between these two forces – a notion that will become clear when reading *Political Theology* and *Concept of the Political* through the lens of Schmitt's comments on religion, myth, and meaning.

3. Meaning and the Sovereign Decision

As noted by many interpreters, *Political Theology* is fundamentally concerned with conditions of legitimacy of the modern state.[136] Echoing his critique of parliamentarism, and presaging his later, more explicit contrasting of legality and legitimacy, Schmitt distinguishes between a normal situation in which a "legal order" of general norms applies and an exceptional case, decided upon by the sovereign, in which the legal order is suspended. It is the exceptional situation that "reveals most clearly the essence of the state's authority" and "proves that to produce law [the decision] need not be based

[136] This is the dominant understanding of *Political Theology* and is the key theme in post-Schmitt developments of political theology as well. See: Saul Newman, *Political Theology: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018).

on law."[137] Importantly, authority (*Autorität*) is for Schmitt not brute coercive power – across his corpus, it is consistently figured as demanding free recognition or acknowledgement and is associated with political legitimacy rather than mere domination.[138] The power to decide what constitutes and how to respond to an extreme case is therefore dependent on the legitimacy of the state, and hence the legitimacy of the sovereign.[139]

Schmitt positions his own account of this problem between two extremes: (1) positive law theories associated with Hans Kelsen, as well as associational theories associated with Otto von Gierke and Hugo Preuss and pluralist theories associated with G.D.H. Cole and Harold Laski, each of which "equated [the state] with with all other association in so far as all were in effect put on the same level;"[140] and (2) counterrevolutionary philosophers reacting to 1789 or 1848 such as Donoso Cortés and Joseph de Maistre. Schmitt directs disproportionate ire towards the first group, which, as noted in the introduction to this chapter, has led some to identify his own positions with those of the second. However, while he treats the counterrevolutionary philosophers with greater sympathy, his own views remain distinct – de Maistre and particularly Cortés appear as tragic figures in the text, recognizing the indispensability of the decision, but unable to divine a path to legitimizing it.

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[137] Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 13

[138] See, for example, the discussion of the Church's authority grounded in its representative capacity in *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, e.g., pp. 17–21

[139] At least on questions concerning the exception, state and sovereign are identical for Schmitt. For example; "But sovereignty (and thus the state itself) resides in deciding this controversy, that is, in determining definitively what constitutes public order and security, in determining when they are disturbed, and so on" (Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 9).

[140] On this, see: George Schwab, *The Challenge of the Exception: An Introduction to the Political Ideas of Carl Schmitt Between 1921 and 1936*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), pp. 55–60

Positive law and associational and pluralist theory all seek to eliminate the personalistic, and therefore also decisionistic, elements from the state and its legal order, confronting the "personal command with the impersonal validity of an abstract norm," which reflects the "liberal constitutional tradition of the nineteenth century."[141] Kelsen, Schmitt's *bête noire* (especially) in *Political Theology*,[142] at points leveraged analogies between "God and the State" to argue this position. Shortly before the publication of *Political Theology*, he wrote that religion and society exhibited a variety of parallelisms owing to their phenomenological resonance – each is experienced by the individual as a series of ties linking them to each other member, as well as to a binding normative authority that conditions their existence. Kelsen sees in these analogies an argument for identifying state and law in service of a genuinely modern legal science – just as natural science absorbed God into nature as a precondition of "a genuine natural science devoid of all metaphysics," so too must a pure theory of law reduce "the supralegal concept of the state to the concept of law" as a precondition of "the development of a genuine science of law...purified of all natural law." Under this framework, the state, considered as the sovereign, cannot suspend the legal order through a "legal miracle" any more than, within natural science, God can suspend the natural order through the divine miracle.[143] The sovereign and the decision vanish when faced with the identity of state and law.

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[141] Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 30

[142] Schmitt and Kelsen would continue to butt heads, most notably in the "guardian controversy" in 1931 – though Stanley Paulson argues that their early positions were much more compatible prior to a decisive split between the two in the early 1920s. On the guardian controversy, see: Stanley L. Paulson, "Hans Kelsen and Carl Schmitt: Growing Discord, Culminating in the 'Guardian' Controversy of 1931," in *Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt*, ed. Jens Meierhenrich and Oliver Simons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 510–46. Also the introduction in: Lars Vinx, ed., *The Guardian of the Constitution: Hans Kelsen and Carl Schmitt on the Limits of Constitutional Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015)

[143] Hans Kelsen, "God and the State."

Schmitt critiques this argument from an internal, immanent perspective. Given that a stable system of norms exists, there must still be the question of who applies the norms – as "the legal idea cannot translate itself independently" – and in this application of norms, the content of the decision assumes an independence from the norms themselves: "That constitutive, specific element of a decision is, from the perspective of the underlying norm, new and alien. Looked at normatively, the decision emanates from nothingness."[144] It is thus impossible to wholly identify law and state – any legal order will still require a decision, which, by dint of being based on authority and "competence" becomes uncriticizable from the perspective of the underlying system of norms. While the indispensability of the decision appears in its highest degree of clarity in the determination of the exception – a decision that can only be made by the sovereign – the normal situation constantly requires decisions in either sovereign or subsovereign (e.g., made by individual judges or bureaucrats) form.

While Kelsen &co. seek to eliminate the sovereign and the decision from the state, the counterrevolutionary philosophers seek to reduce the state to the decision. According to Schmitt, these writers

> "...hightened the moment of the decision to such an extent that the notion of legitimacy, their starting point, was finally dissolved. As soon as Donoso Cortés realized that the period of monarchy had come to an end because there no longer were kings and no one would have the courage to be king in any way other than by the will of the people, he brought his decisionism to its logical conclusion...to a pure decision not based on reason and discussion and not justifying itself, that is, to an absolute decision created out of nothingness. But this decisionism is essentially dictatorship, not legitimacy."[145]

[144] Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, pp. 31–32

[145] Ibid., pp. 65–66

Cortés and the other counterrevolutionaries, as consummate theistic, juridical thinkers, proved incapable of understanding or utilizing the new forms of democratic legitimacy that, after the French Revolution and especially after 1848, had progressively supplanted dynastic legitimacy.[146] Legitimacy in the "traditional sense" – legitimacy as they knew it – was dead, and along with it all forms of political justification accessible to them. The legitimate decision of the sovereign, emerging out of normative nothingness, is therefore reduced to an "absolute decision created out of [total] nothingness" – in other words, a decision with no ground of legitimacy. In their reaction to the "onslaught against the political," the counterrevolutionaries preserved the core political idea of the decision, but without a grounding in legitimacy that would make it applicable in practice.[147]

In relation to these two sets of interlocutors, Schmitt stakes out his own position alongside a study of the "sociology of the concept of sovereignty." The first sentence of Chapter 3 of *Political Theology* famously claims that "All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts," listing as examples the analogy between the "omnipotent God" and "omnipotent lawgiver" as well as between the "exception in jurisprudence" and the "miracle in theology." Contra many interpretations, Schmitt is not here claiming that a proper theory of the state *should* or *must* engage in these analogies. Keeping in mind Kelsen's use of such analogies to argue against the miraculous legal exception, we should see Schmitt's comment as a rebuttal: Kelsen's pure theory of law is not, as he claimed, independent of metaphysics – rather, the modern constitutional

[146] For Bonald, Schmitt writes, "tradition offered the sole possibility of gaining the content that man was capable of accepting metaphysically" – the new metaphysics, breaking with tradition, remained out of reach for him. See: Ibid., p. 54

[147] Ibid., p. 65

state "triumphed together with deism," with each eliminating their respective "miracles" from their ideas.[148]

It is this observation that leads Schmitt into his sociology of the concept of sovereignty. Against "casual intimations" and polemical accusations of "indulging in theology or metaphysics," he claims to pursue a systematic study of the structural identity between the "metaphysical image that a definite epoch forges of the world" and "what the world immediately understands to be appropriate as a form of political organization." In other words, as the metaphysics of an era changes, so too do the political forms considered legitimate – though, Schmitt is careful to point out, this is an ever-present identity rather than a causal relation in which one assumes primacy over the other. While Schmitt's periodization is never systematically articulated, and different epochs overlap at their margins, he suggests at different points that the theistic metaphysics of the sixteenth and seventeenth century aligned with an absolute monarchical "sole sovereign" who "'develops all the inherent characteristics of the state by a sort of continual creation.'" The deistic metaphysics of the Enlightenment aligned with the constitutional state, which eliminated the miraculous exception but kept the sovereign "as the engineer of the great machine," maintaining its functioning. Finally, the natural-scientific metaphysics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries eliminated even this engineer sovereign – legal norm became identified with natural law, which "applies without exception;" the universe, along with the state, now "runs by itself."[149]

[148] Ibid., p. 36

[149] Ibid., pp. 38–48

Starting with Rousseau, and especially since the 1848 revolutions, this natural-scientific thinking took on a "quantitative" dimension – "the people" became sovereign, and a logic of immanence (of both God to the world and the sovereign to the state) generated a series of political identities: the "democratic identity of ruler and ruled" and Kelsen's identity of "state and legal order." Thus a "new concept of legitimacy" triumphed, the democratic replacing the dynastic. It was this new notion of legitimacy, grounded in a "mathematical natural-scientific thinking" that the counterrevolutionaries were unable to understand and leverage – Cortés "was in complete accord with the thought of the Middle Ages." Shifting metaphysics and foundations of legitimacy had passed him by, along with his decisionism.[150]

Schmitt's sociology of juristic concepts serves two purposes in the text: First, it intends to disprove Kelsen's (and others') claim to develop a notion of law and/as state that was free from all metaphysics by showing that the elimination of a sovereign transcendent vis-à-vis the state is not a liberation from metaphysics, but rather the culmination of metaphysical developments dating from the initial exclusion of an active God (from the world) and active sovereign (from the state) in the eighteenth century. Second, it displays the difficulty of establishing a legitimate (and hence stable) form of decisionism in the twentieth century. The modern structure of "mathematical, natural-scientific" metaphysics aligns with a form of democratic politics that precludes the possibility of the decision – the organic unity of "the people" as bearers of all legitimacy is unable to form the personalistic will required by a singular decision. Viewed in this way, *Political Theology* is a project of

[150] Ibid., pp. 48–52

dual critiques – of Kelsen and positive law on the one hand and the antiquated monarchism of the counterrevolutionaries on the other – but not a positive political statement.

Where then to locate Schmitt's own position? *Political Theology*, like much of Schmitt's work, can easily be read as both a "neutral observation…[and] a normative observation on the question of modernity's liberation from the legacy of theological thought"[151] – but it is precisely in the apparently neutral observations that Schmitt's own normative claim emerges. The dual critiques in the book create a set of ostensible necessities: First, Schmitt's account of the development of metaphysical structures shows that, for him, "legitimacy in this age must be democratic"[152] – it must speak in and be acknowledged as the voice of the people. Second, the capacity for a decision must exist as both a legal-logical postulate (in the everyday functioning of the normal situation, contra Kelsen) and as an imperative of political survival (in the sovereign decision on the exception). Hemmed in by these constraints, Schmitt's position is clear: The only desirable, indeed the only possible, politics in the twentieth century is one that attains the legitimating force of (a particular) people *and* enables the personalistic decision and hence the presence of the sole sovereign.

The form this could take was already suggested in his prior works: In *Dictatorship*, Schmitt distinguishes between a commissary dictatorship created by a constituted sovereign authority to safeguard the existing constitution against an immediate threat, and a sovereign dictatorship, which can only be made legitimate as a commission from the people in their capacity as the constitutive

[151] Pini Ifergan, "Cutting to the Chase: Carl Schmitt and Hans Blumenberg on Political Theology and Secularization," *New German Critique* 37, no. 3 (2010): 149–71.

[152] Tracy Strong, "Foreword," in *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. xxv

power.[153] But this kind of democratic legitimacy, Schmitt claims in *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* requires the substantial homogeneity of the democratic people – a precondition of the substantive identity of ruler and ruled and thus for substantive representation "through acclamation, through something taken for granted, an obvious and unchallenged presence."[154] This democratic homogeneity is, Schmitt claims, today almost universally a "national homogeneity:" "membership in a particular nation." And, assuredly not by coincidence, the dominant myth today – the dominant structure of meaning arising from the masses that impells their action and ensures the stability of the political order – is that of the nation, which can appear "in the most diverse ways, in very different peoples," being ethno-racial, cultural, linguistic, based in "common fate or destiny," or some combination thereof.[155] These different bases of the national myth form different principles of belonging to that nation. The meaningful national myth, created by the masses, therefore forms the substance of homogeneity that must be leveraged by the sovereign in order to attain democratic legitimacy – and the substantive value system, what Schmitt in *Legality and Legitimacy* calls a "system of meaning,"[156] which is embodied by that nation and that enables legitimizing acclamation will differ greatly depending on the substance of the different national myths. The sovereign decision regarding the exception, political form, and substantive values is therefore anything but arbitrary – unencumbered by law, it is nonetheless heavily

[153] Carl Schmitt, *Dictatorship: From the Origin of the Modern Concept of Sovereignty to Proletarian Class Struggle*, trans. Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2013), especially Ch. 4

[154] Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, p. 9, 16

[155] Ibid., p. 75

[156] Carl Schmitt, *Legality and Legitimacy*, p. 46

conditioned by the religio-mythical system of meaning emerging from the masses and constituting the only possible foundation of the legitimacy, and therefore stability, of the state.

Duncan Kelly is correct in seeing Schmitt's political theology as simultaneously a recognition of the people as the only legitimate constituent power and an attempt to constrain that power by framing the people as a passive and "formless mass" only given an active form through substantive representation by a sovereign power.[157] This is why, as Miguel Vatter puts it, "political theology depends on representation."[158] However, this formulation ignores half the picture. Not only does the sovereign constrain the people, but the people also constrain the sovereign through the meaningful substance that is generated from the ground-up and which forms the basis for the legitimacy of the state. Nor do these constraints on sovereignty end with political legitimacy and the foundations of the political form – as we will see, they wash into what Schmitt perceives as the paradigmatic political activity: the designation of friends and enemies.

3.1 Meaning and Conflict

As noted by many interpreters, *Political Theology* and *The Concept of the Political* are intimately related, with the sovereign decision of the former being "identical to the distinction between friend and enemy" in the latter.[159] The constraints on sovereign decision that, on my reading,

[157] Duncan Kelly, "Carl Schmitt's Political Theory of Dictatorship," in *Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt*, ed. Jens Meierhenrich and Oliver Simons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 217–44.

[158] Miguel Vatter, "The Political Theology of Carl Schmitt," in *Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt*, ed. Jens Meierhenrich and Oliver Simons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 245–68.

[159] Sjoerd Griffioen, *Contesting Modernity in the German Secularization Debate*, p. 80. This is arguably the dominant interpretive position in the literature with respect to these two texts; cf: Mariano Croce and Andrea Salvatore, *Carl Schmitt's Institutional Theory: The Political Power of Normality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), Ch. 3

appear in *Political Theology* therefore also appear in *Concept of the Political*, manifested most clearly in Schmitt's often-overlooked comments on the necessity of justification in declarations of enmity.

The imperative to develop a new concept of the political emerges from the triumph of democratic legitimacy over both dynastic legitimacy and liberal neutrality and legality. Schmitt rejects circular attempts to define the political as that which concerns the state and the state as "something political" – such characterizations are useful only when "the state possesses the monopoly on politics," with a clear distinction between it and "nonpolitical groups and affairs" within the rest of society. Democracy, however, eliminates "all the typical distinctions and depoliticalizations characteristic of the liberal nineteenth century" – the previously nonpolitical domains ("religion, culture, education, the economy") become "potentially political," the strong distinction between state and society collapses, and a democratically driven "total state" emerges that "potentially embraces every domain." In the midst of this mish-mash of different spheres of life, Schmitt claims, an awareness of the genuine character of the political has been lost. This character of the political, Schmitt famously locates in the distinction between friends and enemies.[160]

The friend-enemy definition of politics is a purely formal one rather than "indicative of substantial content" and it is in this formal sense that the political distinction is "independent" vis-a-vis other domains of life – that is, the friend-enemy distinction is not consistently, as a rule reducible to the good-evil distinction in morals, profitable-unprofitable distinction in economics, the beautiful-ugly distinction in aesthetics, and so on. In filling out the substance of its definitional antagonism,

[160] Carl Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, pp. 19–23

however, the political "draws upon other distinctions for support." In the event that nonpolitical distinctions, either singularly or as a "coalition," reach such a degree of intensity that, on this basis, friend-enemy groupings containing the possibility of real warfare may be drawn, these antagonisms become political, and the original "nonpolitical antithesis, at precisely the moment at which it becomes political, pushes aside and subordinates its hitherto purely religious, purely economic, purely cultural criteria and motives."[161]

Crucially, the possibility of warfare is not independently and arbitrarily determined solely by a sovereign decision, but requires justification to those who are concretely asked to kill and risk being killed. Spheres of life outside of politics, unless they have reached a political intensity, are not able to sustain such justifications: "To demand seriously of human beings that they kill others and be prepared to die themselves so that trade and industry may flourish....or that the purchasing power of grandchildren may grow is sinister and crazy."[162] This requirement of justification is the root of liberalism's distinctly anti-political tenor for Schmitt. In a society centered on competition in the economic realm and discussion in the intellectual realm, connected by a metaphysics of individualism, the intensity of public political enmity cannot emerge – the "sacrifice of life" in warfare is "in no way justifiable by the individualism of liberal thought."[163]

Instead, what can enable such a justification must for Schmitt always be "existential." The enemy must be (recognized as) something "different and alien" that threatens the political entity's

[161] Ibid., pp. 26–27, 38

[162] Ibid., p. 48

[163] Ibid., p. 71

"way of life and therefore must be repulsed or fought in order to preserve one's own form of existence."[164] In other words, the enemy threatens "in a specially intense way" the *substance of peoplehood* – what makes a "collectivity of men" into a political entity, and which thereby creates the conditions for the delineation of friends and enemies in the first place. As Herbert Marcuse notes, "there is no fundamental or general criterion...for determining which facts and conditions are to be considered existential."[165] As the political may draw on other domains to create friend-enemy distinctions (e.g., framing the heretic, the morally repugnant, the economically backwards as the enemy), the substantive "way of life" may similarly incorporate these so long as they are sufficiently intense to condition the system of meaning that determines the identity, essence, and existence of a collectivity. Religion, nation, class, etc, may exist and even be recognized within what Schmitt elsewhere called "palpable reality,"[166] but in order to become political, they must be imbued with a significance and value that elevates them into the substantive content of peoplehood – in other words, they must become something of such profound meaning that they are worth the risk of killing and being killed.

Within an age in which, according to Schmitt, both nationalism and democracy seem to have the "dispensation of providence,"[167] the existential substance of peoplehood (which may be threatened by an existential other, justifying warfare) that occupies a central place in *Concept of the Political*

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[164] Ibid., p. 27

[165] Herbert Marcuse, *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (London: MayFlyBooks, 2009), pp. 21–22

[166] Carl Schmitt, *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, p. 26

[167] Ibid., p. 23

becomes identical to the principle of homogeneity that establishes democratic belonging, which, as mentioned above, is in turn identical to the meaningful national myth created by the masses – a myth that gives them the "strength for martyrdom as well as the courage to use force."[168] This is, however, not to say that a sovereign decision plays no role other than recognizing an enemy pre-determined by this national myth. While Schmitt at points hints that myths may themselves suggest enemies,[169] the necessity in *Concept of the Political* of justification, rather than pure designation, implies that the enemy does not appear as evident to the people – but it simultaneously implies that the people, rather than the sovereign, are the final arbiters of enmity. As Schmitt put it in *Constitutional Theory*, the people may not be able to propose anything, but if there exists a legitimate authority capable of putting a proposal to them, "the people can always say yes or no, consent or reject, and their yes or no becomes all the more simple and elementary, the more it is a matter of a fundamental decision on their own existence in its entirety"[170] – the decision on the "existential other," and hence the affirmation of one's own substance, may be the most fundamental of these decisions. There is therefore, as Alexandre Lefebvre puts it, a "co-originality" at play, in which the declaration of enmity re-establishes the substance of the political community while at the same time presupposing that community as the basis of decision. But this declaration of enmity is not a pure sovereign decision, and nor, contra Lefebvre, is it "given" to the state in the form of an obviously bellicose neighbor.[171] It falls to the sovereign to

[168] Ibid., p. 68

[169] Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, pp. 73–75

[170] Carl Schmitt, *Constitutional Theory*, p. 131

[171] Alexandre Lefebvre, "The Political Given: Decisionism in Schmitt's Concept of the Political," *Telos*, no. 132 (2005): 83–98.

propose enemies – to "create an image of the enemy"[172] as that which is opposed to all that is right, good, and normal – but this process is not one of arbitrary will, but rather a constant interplay between the judgement of the sovereign and the "constructs of meaning"[173] held by the masses.

4. Privatization and Management of Meaning: Schmitt and Liberalism

Schmitt infamously claims that the maintenance of a political community requires safeguarding it not only from external threats, but internal ones as well. Echoing earlier comments about the necessity of internal homogeneity in the context of democratic legitimacy, Schmitt suggests that a state, as "the decisive political entity" must sometimes declare a "domestic enemy" in the interests of "internal peace," but also in order to preserve the "possibility of waging war and thereby publicly disposing of the lives of men."[174] Naturally, if the substance of peoplehood, and as a consequence the integrity and efficacy of its state, is determined by its system of meaning, then the existence of multiple systems of meaning within the same state is bound to erode this. Political entities are characterized above all by their ability to determine friends and enemies and, consequently, their ability to justifiably demand participation in war – a function that is rendered impossible by the existence of multiple systems of meaning and therefore multiple aspects of life that are worth warfare. Real conflict with a religious, cultural, ethnic, or economic other may be to one faction an existential threat justifiably repelled, while to another faction, conflict with these same groups may appear in service only to a specific normative, religious, or economic power. Such a split in the "constructs of

[172] Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, pp. 73–74

[173] Carl Schmitt, "Three Possibilities for a Christian Conception of History," pp. 167–168

[174] Carl Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, p. 46

meaning" that justify conflict, and hence are generative of the political, will, if left unchecked, tend towards the dissolution of the political community. Viewed in this way, the declaration of domestic enemies constitutes the management of meaning within the political community – ensuring that the state remains unified internally and on proper footing externally.

The declaration of domestic enemies reflects a long-running theme in Schmitt's work: the danger of irruptions or proliferations of meaning that threaten the unity of the political community. It is on this cautionary note that Schmitt closes *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*. The rise of myth is held up in Chapter 4 as a symptom of the decline of rationalist, procedural parliamentary thought. In its opposition to romantic, never-ending discussion and its prioritization of vital, intensive life over abstract principles and the "democracy of mankind," it is difficult not to detect a note of celebration in Schmitt's characterization of the triumph of mythic justifications for conflict. At the same time, however, Schmitt allows a note of concern to creep in: In confronting the sovereign with meaningful drivers of conflict that are at best partially controllable, there exists the perpetual risk of factional conflict and destabilization – the risk that "The last remnants of solidarity and a feeling of belonging together will be destroyed in the pluralism of an unforeseeable number of myths."[175]

Extending Schmitt's thought a bit, we might ask how this possibility is to be averted. Certainly, Schmitt assures us, this cannot be accomplished through the procedures and abstract norms of liberal constitutional systems: "no mechanical apparatus can build a dam if a new storm of historical life has broken loose,"[176] and the concrete, vital force of life cannot be relativized and incorporated into

[175] Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, p. 76

[176] Ibid., p. 68

parliamentary discussion. Instead, as the sole motive for the use of force, myth can only be combatted with myth – as a "real battle, not as a slogan for parliamentary speeches and democratic electoral campaigns."[177] As Schmitt would later put it in his 1929 essay, "life struggles not with death, spirit not with spiritlessness; spirit struggles with spirit, life with life."[178] The domestic enemies of the state appear here in a preliminary form as aberrant myth-makers – those who would assert alternate meaningful frameworks of justification for the use of force against the dominant myth of the nation. In such a situation, the competent sovereign has only one possible course of action: the declaration of enmity and the leveraging of vital nationalist energies to stamp out the plurality of myths. Here, as in *Concept of the Political*, Schmitt emphasizes the importance of maintaining a unified construct of meaning within a political community – a unified (national) myth, against mythic irruptions of class consciousness, alternate conceptions of the nation, and so on.

Furthermore, this management of meaning, or rather the refusal to do so, is key to Schmitt's critique of liberalism. Beyond his accusation (both before and especially after the war) that Weimar liberalism was unable to designate Nazism as a domestic enemy and respond with appropriate action, Schmitt characterizes liberalism as a system that precisely privatizes all meaning, therefore removing it from its proper place in the public, political realm, and also removing it as a target of political action. While this critique appears in pieces throughout Schmitt's Weimar-era work, it is arguably clearest in 1919's *Political Romanticism*.

[177] Ibid., pp. 70–71

[178] Carl Schmitt, *The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations*, p. 96

Romanticism for Schmitt is defined above all by a "subjectified occasionalism" – the making of the world and all that exists within it into an occasion for the free play of the subjective, individual, romantic imagination. Everything from a political revolution to the flutter of a butterfly wing becomes potentially "the first term in an infinite series, the beginning of an endless novel." The romantic therefore finds themself awash in a pseudo-reality of an "infinity of meanings," as each moment and "concrete point" in the world may serve as the occasion for a new worldbuilding project of "romantic productivity." The occasionalism of romanticism is qualitatively distinct from the thetistic occasionalism from which it derives. In the latter, "God is the final, absolute authority, and the entire world and everything in it are nothing more than an occasion for his sole agency." Romantic occasionalism takes "a secularized form" – the subjectivity of the individual is elevated to the position previously occupied by God as final arbiter and authority, and the romantic subject therefore "treats the world as an occasion and an opportunity for his romantic productivity."[179]

This process of secularization contains profound political implications, stripping collective life of the structures of meaning required for effective politics. In theistic occasionalism, the ultimate authority of God is still able to support a consistent and stable order – but political romanticism, in its individualization and privatization of everything, proves hostile to all political and social order – any "purposive or normative nexus," anything that "gives consistency and order to life," dissolves in the arbitrary play of the individual mind with infinite possibilities and subjective inspiration. The infinitude of the romantic disposition leaves it unable to attain a consistent concept of meaning –

[179] Carl Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, pp. 15–19, 74

attempts to do so either result in a never-completed "punctuation without substance" ("meaning is…") or devolve into tautology (meaning is "nothing other than itself"). What is left is "a world that is only occasional, a world without substance and functional cohesion, without a fixed direction." For the romantic, the social and political world becomes in-itself meaningless – a world-historical event is "intrinsically indifferent," becoming "significant only when it has become the occasion for a great experience."[180]

The political romantic is therefore unable to accept or create collective systems of values or a conception of the proper order of things, rendering him thoroughly apolitical: "Neither logical distinctions, nor moral values judgements, nor political decisions are possible for him. The most important source of political vitality, the belief in justice and an indignation over injustice, does not exist for him." These systems of meaning required by politics cannot exist without "transcend[ing] the limits of the subjective" – no political community can maintain itself and act in the world without "a concept of what is normal and what is right" – hence political romanticism, in privatizing meaning and making it dependent on the arbitrary will of the individual, constantly strains against political order itself.[181]

As McCormick points out, the abstract, formal, or rational elements of modernity manifesting in liberalism and technical thinking and the fascination with concrete particularities manifested in political romanticism do not form a simple opposition, but are rather "intrinsically related in a

[180] Ibid., Ch. 2

[181] Ibid., pp. 129–130, 159–162

structural manner."[182] Indeed, for Schmitt, the privatization of religion – liberalism's originary privatization[183] – removes ultimate divine authority from the public realm, subsequently resulting in the privatization of all meaning. The meaning accorded to a historical event or object in the world becomes a subjective matter: "In the liberal bourgeois world, the detached, isolated, and emancipated individual becomes the middle point, the court of last resort, the absolute."[184]

In *Roman Catholicism and Political Form,* Schmitt speaks of this cascade of privatizations as a "religion of privacy." The freedom of religion – the "first right of the individual in the sense of the bourgeois social order" – by shifting religion from the public to the private sphere had the effect of giving "privacy a religious sanction." The resulting religion of privacy proliferated in a system of further privatizations and individual freedoms. Without this religious system, with the privatization of religion as its "fountainhead and first principle," the structure of the liberal "social order would collapse."[185]

The religion of privacy may support the liberal state, but if the private subjectivity of the individual is the only thing held sacred, then the only common and public meaningful principle must be something sufficiently abstract and substanceless that it does not threaten the status of the individual as final judge and arbiter. From this emerges, as Schmitt would put it in a 1950 essay, the "pseudo-religion of humanity." Absent any substantive collective system of meaning, the human

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[182] John McCormick*, Carl Schmitt's Critique of Liberalism*, pp. 16–17, 48–49, 65–66

[183] Carl Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, p. 28

[184] Carl Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, p. 99

[185] Carl Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, pp. 28–29

emerges as a concept that pretends to universality but "only superficially neutralizes differences between people." Under this religion that insists on the privatization of all meaning, "every opponent [becomes] a beast," an "inhuman,"[186] and from this emerges the nihilistic wars of total destruction that Schmitt railed against in *Concept of the Political*.[187] For Schmitt, the privatization of meaning – beginning with religion and later extending through all aspects of life – is the distinctive characteristic of liberalism and produces what he sees as both its political instability and its absolutist wars of extermination.

In this way, Schmitt forms a polemical counterpoint to liberalism: rather than privatize all meaning, Schmitt publicizes all meaning, positioning it as central to politics and therefore as an appropriate object of political action. If in *Concept of the Political*, liberalism is unable to recognize external and internal enemies, or in *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, it has been reduced to an "empty apparatus" of substance-less procedures and rules, or in *Legality and Legitimacy* it reaches for mere legality as a poor substitute for genuine legitimacy – this is because at the core of friends and enemies, political substance, and legitimacy lies the public presence of human meaning and its utilization and regulation by sovereign and state.

5. Conclusion

For Schmitt, meaning is therefore both indispensable and dangerous. Without it, no political order can hope to survive, yet by the same token, the possibility of its fragmentation and proliferation

[186] Carl Schmitt, "A Pan-European Interpretation of Donoso Cortes," trans. Mark Grzeskowiak, *Telos* 125 (2002): 100–115.

[187] Carl Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, pp. 36–37

constantly threatens to destabilize the political order. It falls to the sovereign, itself constantly constrained by the masses' system of meaning, to both leverage meaning in support of political action, as well as carefully manage and prune it to assure stability. This is a delicate balancing act – but for Schmitt, a possible and even necessary one. However, subsequent writers, like Karl Löwith and Eric Voegelin, addressed in the next two chapters, challenged this. Whereas Schmitt acknowledged that the loss of religion as a unifying framework meant the irreversible fragmentation of meaning, hence necessitating the management of its irruption from below, from the masses, Löwith saw in Schmitt's own decisionistic response to this loss of unified meaning the origin of the catastrophes of the twentieth century; conversely, Voegelin believed that in this same fragmented world, such irruptions of meaning were unpredictable, uncontrollable, and politically catastrophic. Instead, he sought the solution to this instability in a return to the principles of true religion – a recognition and political manifestation of the transcendental "ground of existence."

Chapter 2: Nihilistic Decisionism – Karl Löwith and the Spectre of Schmitt

1. Introduction

The book typically taken to be Karl Löwith's magnum opus, *Meaning in History*, was initially published in English in 1949. Upon the release of the book's German translation in 1953, Löwith expressed some concern that, because the book was written for an American audience, it might seem to its German readers both longwinded and lacking rigor.[188] Even prior to this point, however, *Meaning in History* made a significant impact on at least one German reader: Carl Schmitt. In a commentary published in 1950 – one year after the book's initial English-language publication and three years prior to the appearance of its German translation – Schmitt, like many other contemporary reviewers, celebrates the "clarity and knowledge" of Löwith's text and deems him "far superior to modern historians and philosophers of history."[189] To a reader familiar with the immediate reception of *Meaning in History*, however, Schmitt's engagement stands out. While Löwith is self-knowingly reticent to propose "constructive results" or pursue the political implications of his genealogy of historical consciousness for politics,[190] his account of the messianic and salvational tone of modern philosophies of history is thematically and substantively continuous with his prior work in the 1930s and 1940s, which consistently tied these claims to the rise of the mass politics of National Socialism. Contemporary reviewers, even those who express familiarity with Löwith's oeuvre, tend to elide this

[188] Karl Löwith, "Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen: Die Theologischen Voraussetzungen Der Geschichtsphilosophie," in *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen*, Sämtliche Schriften (Berlin: J.B. Metzler, 1983), 7–239, "Vorwort:"

[189] Carl Schmitt, "Three Possibilities for a Christian Conception of History," pp. 167–168

[190] Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History*, p. v, cf. p. 203

implication and read *Meaning in History* apolitically.[191] In contrast, Schmitt immediately recognizes the political import of a meaningful history, beginning his commentary with a meditation on the utility of such histories in "unit[ing] the masses behind" existential warfare and "great plans [*Groß-planungen*]."[192]

At the same time, however, Schmitt's praise and recognition strikes an odd note given its subject: While Löwith himself criticized in the strongest terms the motivational force of salvational histories, Schmitt seems elated at this possibility, speaking of the sway of of philosophies of history over the masses in the same ecstatic tone he reserved for the power of myth in *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*.[193] Schmitt, then, simultaneously recognized the political undertones of *Meaning in History* while drawing precisely the opposite political conclusions from it, whether by willful adaptation or simple misreading.[194] In either case, I argue in this Chapter that one reason for this curious dynamic lies precisely in Schmitt's influence on Löwith's intellectual development. Specifically, Löwith's initial engagement with Schmitt's Weimar-era writing, culminating in his 1935 article "The Occasional Decisionism of Carl Schmitt," constitutes a key inflection point in his work: The arguments, themes, and ideas that Löwith developed in this essay would form the core of his

[191] e.g., Helmut Kuhn, "[Review] Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History by Karl Löwith," *The Journal of Philosophy* 46, no. 25 (1949): 822–26; see also: Reinhold Niebuhr, "[Review] Meaning in History by Karl Löwith," *The Journal of Religion* 29, no. 4 (1949): 302–3

[192] Carl Schmitt, "Three Possibilities for a Christian Conception of History," pp. 167–168

[193] Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, Ch. 4

[194] Sjoerd Griffoen, for example, claims that Schmitt's account of Löwith's book frequently "tips over into misrepresentation" as a "conscious strategy," with Schmitt attempting to present his own views on the politics of history in Löwith's voice. Joe Paul Kroll has similarly noted how Schmitt "gives [Löwith's claims] his own peculiar twist." See: Sjoerd Griffoen, *Contesting Modernity in the German Secularization Debate*, pp. 136–139; Joe Paul Kroll, *A Human End to History*, p. 179

research project for the next three-plus decades. In the process, Löwith would fashion himself as something of an anti-Schmitt – while the two were joined in their common concern with a loss of given meaning within the modern world and the relation of this meaning (or lack thereof) to politics, Löwith saw Schmitt as a negative example of how to contend with this situation that each in different ways recognized, and as *the* paradigmatic figure of the catastrophes of the twentieth century. In other words, to understand Schmitt – his set of concerns, the historical roots of his nihilism and decisionism, his philosophical-political orientation, the reason for his appeal – was to understand the rise of fascism.

This chapter contributes to the scholarly literature on Löwith in two key ways. First, it contributes to the contextualization and mapping of Löwith's oeuvre by explicating the underappreciated role of his engagements with Schmitt in developing the ideas that would, largely speaking, come to define his key contributions to twentieth century philosophy. Indeed, if the importance of "Occasional Decisionism" on Löwith's mature philosophical-historical themes has gone underappreciated, this is in part because most secondary literature has tended to focus precisely on this post-1935 period of Löwith's work,[195] with the exception of those concerned with the specific relationship between Max Weber and Karl Marx, by whom Löwith's 1932 book has long been held in high regard.[196] The Löwith most known to contemporary scholars is thus a Löwith already writing under the spectre of Schmitt. Recovering the anti-Schmittian roots of Löwith's work helps reveal the

[195] For example, even in the preface to one of Löwith's earlier works (*Max Weber and Karl Marx*, 1932), Bryan Turner situates the text largely in relation to Löwith's post-1936 work rather than his earlier writings. See: Bryan S. Turner, "Preface to the New Edition," in *Max Weber and Karl Marx*, ed. Tom Bottomore and William Outhwaite (London: Routledge, 1993), 1–32.

[196] Anthony Giddens refers to this work as "still probably the best source" on the relation between these two figures. See: Anthony Giddens, "Marx and Weber: A Reply to Mr. Walton," *Sociology* 5, no. 3 (1971): 395–97, 395n.1

political stakes of a writer often taken to be "apolitical," while also showing how Schmitt's wartime and post-war influence can be mapped not only via the innumerable overt critiques of Schmitt and debates in which he engaged, but also via those who recoiled from his work and epistolary advances.[197] While Löwith's direct engagements with Schmitt were limited to three articles (two of which are nearly identical, as each "reiterate[s] the main points from ['Occasional Decisionism']"),[198] the framework that Löwith developed in writing "Occasional Decisionism" would remain remarkably consistent in the decades following its publication – each of its elements would be elaborated and expanded in later publications, but always in a way that brings them back, explicitly or implicitly, to Schmitt's "active nihilism" of decisionism. In this way, rather than being limited to direct engagements, we can consider Löwith's post-1935 work as a whole to be, among other things, an extended critique of Schmitt as the figure who best represented the perverse meaning-making of his age.

Second, and relatedly, this chapter provides crucial context for Löwith's apparently underwhelming positive political program, which is frequently targeted for critique in isolation from his broader work. As elaborated in Section 2, secondary sources tend to read (and criticize) Löwith as a "stoic" thinker who advocates a withdrawal from politics. While this characterization is not wholly inaccurate, it ignores the complex, interconnected account of the conditions of the modern world that leads Löwith to this comparatively anodyne conclusion – an account, and a conclusion, that developed with Schmitt as a constant, if often implicit, interlocutor. My aim here is not to rehabilitate

[197] As discussed in the next section, while Löwith did pen explicit critiques of Schmitt and mention him at multiple points in his writing, he also resisted Schmitt's attempts to goad him into debates or exchanges of ideas, both in private correspondence and publications.

[198] On this: Sjoerd Griffioen, *Contesting Modernity in the German Secularization Debate*, pp. 109–112

Löwith's politics, often taken to be implausible or irresponsibly muted, but rather to show how the conventional scholarly wisdom regarding Löwith's politics effaces the genuine core of his work by reducing him to a disengaged, even cowardly, flyer from politics.

1.1 Introduction: Löwith's Turn

Löwith's critique of Schmitt in "Occasional Decisionism" represented not merely an intellectual turning point, but also an awakening from a politically insulated slumber. Löwith himself in his 1940 memoirs noted his largely apolitical orientation persisting as late as 1931: "I was indifferent to the political situation, and for years I did not even read a newspaper. It was only much later that I became aware of the growing threat from Hitler's movement. I was as innocent about politics as were most of my colleagues."[199] For Löwith, a secular Jew, it may have been Hitler's *völkisch* movement itself that constituted the initial shock to his tranquil isolation from politics, but it is clear that Löwith comprehended this initial shock through the work of Schmitt, who had joined the Nazi Party in 1933.

Indeed, in some respects, situating Löwith's "Occasional Decisionism" article as a turning point in his thought may seem unsurprising, as its formulation in the years prior to 1935 coincided with the triumph of Nazism and Löwith's own flight from Germany in 1934. Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political* was the topic of Löwith's final seminar and, along with his book on Nietzsche's eternal recurrence, constituted his first writing project after arriving in Italy.[200] The effects of the earth-shaking political events in Germany are therefore easily conflated with the intellectual spur to Löwith

[199] Karl Löwith, *My Life in Germany Before and after 1933: A Report*, trans. Elizabeth King (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), p. 69

[200] Ibid., pp. xix, 85

given by Schmitt's decisionism. While it is important to keep this distinction in mind, however, what becomes clear both in "Occasional Decisionism" and in subsequent writings is that Schmitt's Weimar-era work stands for Löwith as perhaps the most salient and lucid representation of the philosophical and ideological presumptions and preconditions of fascism – one that made clear the broader existential and cultural shifts behind the mass movement of German fascism. In other words, while the concrete political situation in Germany, not to mention Löwith's own 1934 exile, certainly drove his post-1935 shift,[201] it is far from coincidental that he initially mapped this new direction through a critical engagement with Schmitt.

This is not to say that the year 1935 in Löwith's oeuvre marks a complete break with what came before. Löwith's 1932 *Max Weber and Karl Marx*, largely a contribution to the history of social theory, situates Weber as contending with a post-Nietzschean world in which the "death of God" has destroyed authoritative ascriptions of "objective meaning and value," and the individual has thus been "thrown back upon itself by a world which has become objectively meaningless."[202] These themes of the decline of objective values and the consequent rise of meaninglessness and "European nihilism" (a term that appears only briefly in *Max Weber and Karl Marx*, but would become central to Löwith's subsequent work) would continue to fascinate Löwith after 1935. In addition, specific interpretive details show a great deal of consistency between Löwith's early and mature work – the

[201] On the impact of Löwith's exile in the run-up to World War II and his new home in the American East Coast on his philosophical thought, see: Matthias Bormuth, "Meaning in History: A Comparison between the Works of Karl Löwith and Erich Auerbach," *Religions* 3 (2012): 151–62.

[202] Karl Löwith, *Max Weber and Karl Marx*, trans. Tom Bottomore and William Outhwaite (London: Routledge, 1993), e.g., pp. 57–60, 86n.77

Heidegger-inflected interpretation of Marx as viewing in communism a future reconciliation of human essence and existence later appeared in much the same form in relation to the rise of decisionism.[203]

What changed was less Löwith's philosophical-historical themes (with the exception of the addition of decisionism) and interlocutors (with the exception of the addition of Schmitt), but rather his orientation to this material and the use to which he put it. Minor themes were expanded to assume central importance in Löwith's work: Nietzsche no longer merely sets the stage for twentieth-century philosophy through proclaiming the death of God, but now is more of interest due to his attempts to overcome this meaninglessness via the doctrine of eternal recurrence. Existentialism ceases to be a defined philosophical movement and instead becomes a broader spirit of the modern age. Above all, however, as a result of his engagements with Schmitt, Löwith's work becomes (1) much more sharply critical and political; and (2) more interconnected. Older themes of existentialism, nihilism, the loss of objective values, and progressive historical narratives are reconfigured into a new, integrated constellation that, Löwith believes, sheds light on the rise of National Socialism.

Section 2 of this Chapter traces the scholarly uptake of Löwith's work, focusing on how Hans Blumenberg's critiques in the 1960s contributed to the diminishing and flattening of Löwith's reputation. Section 3 examines Löwith's 1935 article "The Occasional Decisionism of Carl Schmitt," drawing out key themes that would increase in prominence and be further elaborated in Löwith's subsequent writings. This will serve as the topic of Section 4, which shows how, in his post-1935 work,

[203] See: Ibid., pp. 98–100; Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth Century Thought*, trans. David E. Green (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 137–151. See also Section 4.4 below.

Löwith developed an integrated account of existentialism, nihilism, and progress as quintessentially modern conditions and connected these directly to Schmitt's decisionism. Section 5 examines Löwith's advocacy of "skepticism" – an orientation of inquiry and humility that he explicitly contrasts to decisionism. The conclusion points towards the next Chapter in this dissertation by previewing that, while Löwith cast a skeptical eye at any universal or absolute meaning in politics, Eric Voegelin – a figure whose mid-century work evinces significant influence from Löwith – argued that an ultimate meaningful "ground" was crucial to collective human life.

2. The Varied Receptions of Karl Löwith

The scholarly uptake of Löwith can be split into a before and after period, with Blumenberg's critique of *Meaning in History* in his 1966 *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (hereafter, *Legitimacy*) serving as the key inflection point. The current liminal, even marginal, position of Löwith within scholarship cannot be understood absent the debate that was sparked by this critique and the responses to it.

Prior to Blumenberg's pushback, *Meaning in History*, as well as Löwith's work as a whole, stood as one of the key bodies of literature of the twentieth century, as noted by both contemporary accounts and retrospectives. Habermas in 2013, though having criticized Löwith fifty years prior, described *Meaning in History* as "one of the most influential books for my generation."[204] Hans Joas, himself a prominent interpreter and later participant in the German secularization debate, spoke to

[204] Jürgen Habermas, "A Reply to My Critics," in *Habermas and Religion*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Eduardo Mendieta, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2013), 347–90.

Löwith's profound influence on subsequent German scholars, especially Reinhart Koselleck.[205] In a more personal register, Jacob Taubes spoke of the massive influence Löwith had on him as a student, writing of his experience reading *From Hegel to Nietzsche*: "It was like scales falling from my eyes as I grasped the line that Löwith traced from Hegel via Marx and Kierkegaard to Nietzsche."[206] Taubes also frequently cited Löwith in his 1947 book *Occidental Eschatology*, and this work evinces a profound influence from Löwith well beyond these citations – to such an extent that Löwith himself, in a letter to Hans Jonas, accused Taubes of plagiarism.[207] Löwith's intellectual authority in the mid-twentieth century was nearly unquestioned. Gadamer in 1965 invoked Löwith in order to treat the status of philosophies of history as "secular form[s] of Christian history" as largely an established fact.[208]

In addition, Löwith's interpretations and critiques of individual thinkers maintained a lasting influence on the receptions of their targets. Charles Bambach notes that Löwith was a leading figure (along with Jaspers and Heidegger) in establishing the "existential" interpretation of Nietzsche, which

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[205] Hans Joas, "The Contingency of Secularization: Reflections on the Problem of Secularization in the Work of Reinhart Koselleck," in *The Benefit of Broad Horizons: Intellectual and Institutional Preconditions for a Global Social Science*, ed. Hans Joas and Barbro Klein (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 87–104.

[206] See: Jacob Taubes, "Carl Schmitt: Apocalyptic Prophet of the Counterrevolution," in *To Carl Schmitt: Letters and Reflections*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 1–18, p. 2

[207] Of *Occidental Eschatology*, Löwith wrote to Jonas: "It's a very good book. And that's no accident – half of it's by you, and the other half of it's by me." See: Hans Jonas, *Memoirs*, ed. Christian Wiese, trans. Krishna Winston (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2008), p. 168, quoted in Martin Treml, "Reinventing the Canonical: The Radical Thinking of Jacob Taubes," in *"Escape to Life:" German Intellectuals in New York: A Compendium on Exile after 1933*, ed. Eckart Goebel and Sigrid Weigel (Göttingen: De Gruyter, 2012), 457–78, pp. 459–460. For a more nuanced assessment of this accusation or an account of the differences between Taubes and Löwith on secularization, see, respectively: Ole Jakob Løland, *Pauline Ugliness: Jacob Taubes and the Turn to Paul* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), p. 192n.32; David Ratmoko, "Preface," in *Occidental Eschatology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), xi–xxiii, pp. xvi–xviii

[208] Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Hermeneutics and Historicism," in *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 528–67," p. 549.

"dominated the postwar image of Nietzsche to an extraordinary extent."[209] Löwith's critical engagements were similarly influential. Kirk Wetters claims that for a time, "Löwith's reputation as a Schmitt-critic was second to none," owing to his (initially anonymous) 1935 essay "Occasional Decisionism" and his 1940 follow-up "Max Weber and His Successors."[210] Similarly, Johannes Fritsche speaks to Löwith's immediate influence on interpretations of Heidegger, viewing him as the "originator" of the account of Heidegger as fundamentally entangled in "empty decisionism" – an interpretation that was subsequently taken up by "Habermas, Richard Wolin, and, in Germany at least, many others,"[211] and has arguably surpassed Löwith's analogous criticism of Schmitt in influence.

Indeed, especially in recent years, Heidegger stands as the figure who most frequently serves as Löwith's counterpoint in secondary literature. In many ways, this focus makes sense: Löwith was himself a student of Heidegger, and his *Habilitationschrift*, as Samuel Moyn notes, was both "indebted to Heidegger" and "tried to correct him, looking back to Ludwig Feuerbach's later philosophy as a possible supplement to Heidegger's theory of intersubjectivity."[212] Löwith also became

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[209] Charles Bambach, "Rethinking the 'Existential' Nietzsche in Germany: Löwith, Jaspers, Heidegger," in *Situating Existentialism: Key Texts in Context*, ed. Jonathan Judaken and Robert Bernasconi (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 305–35.

[210] Kirk Wetters, "Genealogy Trouble: Secularization and the Leveling of Theory," in *Genealogies of the Secular: The Making of Modern German Thought*, ed. Willem Styfhals and Stéphane Symons (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019), 21–50, p. 29

[211] Johannes Fritsche, "From National Socialism to Postmodernism: Löwith on Heidegger," *Constellations* 16, no. 1 (2009): 84–105.

[212] Samuel Moyn, *Origins of the Other: Emmanuel Levinas between Revelation and Ethics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), pp. 70–77. On Löwith's contribution to this project both here and in some of his subsequent work, see also: Felipe Léon, "Karl Löwith on the I-Thou Relation and Interpersonal Proximity," *Continental Philosophy Review* 57 (2024): 141–63. Relatedly, for the contributions of Löwith's earliest Heidegger-inflected work to theories of sociality, see: Gerhard Thornhauser, "Karl Löwith's Understanding of Sociality," in *The Phenomenological Approach to Social Reality: History, Concepts, Problems*, ed. Alessandro Salice and Hans Bernhard Schmid (Switzerland: Springer, 2016), 121–44.

key to post-war debates over Heidegger's politics by being one of the first and strongest voices to argue, on the basis of both philosophical analysis and personal conversations, that Heidegger's turn to Nazism was not a matter of expediency, but rather emerged directly from his philosophy of Being.[213]

Löwith's intellectual star would begin to fall with the 1966 publication of Blumenberg's *Legitimacy*, which attacked the "secularization thesis" of *Meaning in History* (along with Schmitt's *Political Theology* and related scholars) as grounded in an untenable form of historical substantialism (e.g., the historical constancy of the "contents" of theology in modernity) and sloppy ascriptions of genealogical descent (e.g., from Christian salvational histories to modern philosophies of history).[214] Löwith responded to Blumenberg's criticisms in a 1968 review of *Legitimacy*,[215] inaugurating what has come to be known as the Löwith-Blumenberg debate.

From the start of the "debate," Löwith was put on the defensive, as most luminaries of the German intelligentsia quickly lined up behind Blumenberg. As Kevin Fox notes, Gadamer was one of the few who openly defended Löwith's concept of secularization, writing a critical review of *Legitimacy* that, along with Löwith's and Schmitt's replies, would influence Blumenberg's revisions in the book's second edition. Löwith's own involvement with the debate largely "started with *Meaning in History* and ended with his review of Blumenberg's work," proceeding from that point via alternate interlocutors. The reticence of Löwith to engage with this debate could be due to the way the "lines

[213] Karl Löwith, "My Last Meeting with Heidegger in Rome, 1936," trans. Richard Wolin, *New German Critique* 45 (1988): 115–16; Karl Lowith, "The Political Implications of Heidegger's Existentialism," trans. Richard Wolin and Melissa J. Cox, *New German Critique* 45 (1988): 117–34.

[214] Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, e.g., pp. 27–62

[215] Karl Löwith, "[Review] Die Legitimität der Neuzeit," *Philosophische Rundschau* 15, no. 3 (1968): 195–209.

were drawn" in the conflict – while "Löwith had intended his work to be a hermeneutical interpretation of the origin of modern historical thinking...his critics read it as nothing less than a brutal attack on modern consciousness." The debate as a whole quickly veered in "a direction so completely independent of Löwith's own aims" that discussions thereof concern not Löwith himself, but only Blumenberg's (mis)interpretation of him.[216]

The debate was introduced to the anglophone world through a 1981 article by Robert Wallace, who cast his lot decisively with Blumenberg against Löwith and helped to structure the later reception of the debate within the United States.[217] Upon the release of *Legitimacy's* English translation (by Wallace himself), immediate reviews largely echoed this assessment. William Bouwsma concluded that "Blumenberg's objections to Löwith's position seem to me wholly convincing;"[218] Martin Jay similarly claimed that Blumenberg "has dealt a death blow to the [secularization] thesis," at least in its "strong form" associated with *Meaning in History*.[219] Few reviewers mustered any kind of defense of Löwith and/or Blumenberg's other targets – one came close in suggesting that, while Blumenberg had largely undercut the historical narratives of secularization theory, he had not demonstrated that such accounts can serve no heuristic purpose.[220]

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[216] Kevin W. Fox, "Karl Löwith: A Prosperous Mind in a Destitute Time" (Ph.D Dissertation, University of Heidelberg, 2012), pp. 178–186

[217] Robert W. Wallace, "Progress, Secularization and Modernity."

[218] William Bouwsma, "[Review] The Legitimacy of the Modern Age by Hans Blumenberg and Robert M. Wallace," *The Journal of Modern History* 56, no. 4 (1984): 698–701.

[219] Martin Jay, "[Review] The Legitimacy of the Modern Age by Hans Blumenberg and Robert M. Wallace," *History and Theory* 24, no. 2 (1985): 183–96, p. 192

[220] Bradford Hinze, "[Review] The Legitimacy of the Modern Age by Hans Blumenberg and Robert M. Wallace," *The Journal of Religion* 66, no. 2 (1986): 209–10.

As Henning Trüper claims, Blumenberg's critique and the subsequent reassessment of secularization discourses that it inspired turned Löwith's work from a live site of interpretation and theoretical elaboration into a "*topos* one did or did not frequent."[221] The reversal in fortunes of *Meaning in History* is such that some have questioned why it ever achieved the prominence it did. Paolo Costa, for example, wonders at the "planetary and enduring success of a work [*Meaning in History*] that is anything but subversive or magniloquent."[222] Those who do engage with Lowith often do so only through *Legitimacy* – most contemporary accounts of *Meaning in History* adopt Blumenberg's description of the work, which amounts to no more than a "straw man that bears little resemblance to Löwith's actual argument" and is "heavily biased" in favor of Blumenberg.[223]

This re-evaluation of Löwith's importance has extended beyond *Meaning in History* to encompass his work as a whole – partly because, as Jayne Svenungsson notes, *Meaning in History* recapitulates several arguments Löwith made in prior work, albeit with a less explicitly political bent.[224] In his survey of twentieth-century political philosophy, Beiner claims that "Of the twelve thinkers surveyed in this book, Karl Löwith has surely been the one whose subsequent influence on political

[221] Henning Trüper, "Löwith, Löwith's Heidegger, and the Unity of History," *History and Theory* 53 (2014): 45–68.

[222] Paolo Costa, *The Post-Secular City: The New Secularization Debate* (Paderborn: Brill, 2022), pp. 5–10

[223] Sjoerd Griffioen, "Secularization between Faith and Reason," pp. 71–72. As Wetters notes, this may be because Blumenberg took more issue with the status of Löwith's work as "dogma" than with Löwith himself." See: Kirk Wetters, "Genealogy Trouble," p. 34

[224] Jayne Svenungsson, "A Secular Utopia: Remarks on the Löwith-Blumenberg Debate," in *Jewish Thought, Utopia, and Revolution*, ed. Elena Namli, Jayne Svenungsson, and Alana Vincent (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014), 65–78, pp. 69–70

philosophers has been the most modest."[225] Indeed, it has become a trope of work on Löwith to begin one's study with some acknowledgement of Löwith's diminutive or underappreciated status within recent political theory/philosophy.[226]

Perhaps more importantly, the prominence of the Löwith-Blumenberg debate, with its exclusive focus (with respect to Löwith) on *Meaning in History*, had the effect of focusing subsequent scholarly attention specifically on this text – even those who engage Löwith's work as a whole tend to read him through the lens of *Meaning in History*. This myopic interpretive trend directly conditions Löwith's relative lack of uptake within political theory and philosophy. The rarity of explicit political statements, especially in this work, has led many to characterize Löwith as a fundamentally "apolitical" thinker (in distinction, for those like Andrew Arato, to contemporaries like Schmitt)[227] – one more interested in lamenting the intellectual fallacies of the modern worldview than engaging with the particularities of modern politics.[228] However, those more engaged with Löwith's work beyond *Meaning in History* tend to reject this characterization. Simona Forti notes that Löwith possesses a diagnosis of totalitarianism that is connected to both the "nihilistic drift of historicism and to the

[225] Ronald Beiner, *Political Philosophy: What It Is and Why It Matters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 63

[226] For example, Arkadiusz Górnisiewicz chides political theorists and historians for "not paying enough attention to the philosophical–political dimension of Löwith's œuvre." Arkadiusz Górnisiewicz, "Existentialism as a Political Problem in Karl Löwith's Thought," *History of European Ideas* 42, no. 7 (2016): 951–64, p. 2

[227] Andrew Arato, "Political Theology and Populism," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 80, no. 1 (2013): 143–72

[228] As Yotam Hotam notes, Löwith was far from the only German-Jewish intellectual, and far from the only student of Heidegger, who was accused in the post-war period of being "apolitical." See: Yotam Hotam, "Overcoming the Mentor: Heidegger's *Present* and the Presence of Heidegger in Karl Löwith's and Hans Jonas' Postwar Thought," *History of European Ideas* 35, no. 2 (2009): 253–64.

process of secularization of transcendence."[229] Similarly, Willem Styfhals and Stéphane Symons have suggested that Löwith views modern philosophies of history as creating the "dangerous illusion" that human actions "pertain to an absolute meaning, thus potentially resulting in totalitarian politics."[230]

A weaker version of this characterization holds that Löwith's political sense was wholly limited to critique, with either an unreachable or entirely absent positive political program. Indeed, it seems easier to make a catalogue of those responses to modernity that Löwith rejected than to discern in his work a genuine political project.[231] This difficulty of discerning in Löwith a political program is reflected in the difficulty of placing him as a thinker. Henrik Syse notes that: "He has been described as an Augustinian, an Aristotelian, and a Stoic."[232] This difficulty of categorization has since been expanded, with some, such as Johannes Fritsche and Jean-Claude Monod, referring to Löwith as postmodernist or as a precursor to postmodernism.[233] Of these characterizations, the one that has most dominated interpretations of Löwith's politics has been to read his work as essentially "stoic."

The most influential, if not the first, interpretation of Löwith as a fundamentally stoic philosopher comes from Habermas, who sees in Löwith a "stoic lament over the loss of a self-evident view of the cosmos" and a consequent attempt to "forge a path back to the ancient view of the

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[229] Simona Forti, *Totalitarianism: A Borderline Idea in Political Philosophy*, trans. Simone Ghelli (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2024), pp. 66–67

[230] Willem Styfhals and Stéphane Symons, "Introduction."

[231] Kevin W. Fox, "Karl Löwith: A Prosperous Mind in a Destitute Time," pp. 101–102

[232] Henrik Syse, "Karl Löwith and Eric Voegelin on Christianity and History," *Modern Age* 43, no. 3 (2000): 253–62.

[233] Jean-Claude Monod, "Heaven on Earth? The Lowith-Blumenberg Debate," in *Radical Secularization? An Inquiry into the Religious Roots of Secular Culture*, ed. Stijn Latré, Walter Van Herck, and Guido Vanheeswijck (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 7–16, p. 10; Johannes Fritsche, "From National Socialism to Postmodernism."

world."[234] Wallace later took up this theme, albeit with a twist, interpreting Löwith's alleged stoicism not as demanding a return to an ancient cyclical cosmos, but as leaving "stoical self-sufficiency and acceptance of what fate may bring" as the only possible political attitude.[235] This characterization of Löwith as a stoic has since become dominant with secondary literature, with scholars such as Michael Gillespie, Ryan McKinnell, and Ronald Beiner claiming that Löwith advocates a return to a stoic view of the eternal natural world,[236] and others like Krystian Pawlaczyk, Richard Wolin, and Eric Voegelin instead viewing Löwith as unable to formulate any political program beyond stoic retreat from the world.[237] While some, such as Rodolphe Gasché, take a more nuanced position – arguing that Löwith does not attempt to recover the classical conception of the natural world, but rather uses it heuristically in his attempt to develop a genuine philosophy appropriate to the age of historical consciousness[238] – most interpretations tend to fall into one of the two poles: Löwith as either recoverer of a stoic natural world, or as an evangelist of stoic withdrawal.

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[234] Jürgen Habermas, "Karl Löwith: Stoic Retreat from Historical Consciousness," in *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 81–100, pp. 83–84

[235] Robert Wallace, "Progress, Secularization, and Modernity," pp. 78–79

[236] Michael Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, p. 356n.28; Ryan Alexander McKinnell, "Nec Spe Nec Metu: Philosophic Catharsis in Karl Löwith's Meaning in History," in *Critics of Enlightenment Rationalism Revisited*, ed. Gene Callahan and Kenneth B. McIntyre (Camden: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 131–44; Ronald Beiner, *Political Philosophy*, p. 63–64

[237] Krystian Pawlaczyk, "Escaping the Terror of Time: Mircea Eliade and Karl Löwith on Linear Time," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 20, no. 59 (2021): 108–22; Richard Wolin, *Heidegger's Children* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 74; Eric Voegelin, "In Search of the Ground," in *Published Essays, 1953-1965*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 224–51, p. 237

[238] Rodolphe Gasché, "On an Eastward Trajectory Towards Europe: Karl Lowith's Exiles," in *"Escape to Life:" German Intellectuals in New York: A Compendium on Exile after 1933*, ed. Eckart Goebel and Sigrid Weigel (Göttingen: De Gruyter, 2012), 305–30.

Many of these characterizations of Löwith as stoic, especially those of Habermas and Wallace, frame this as a critique, pointing either to the impossibility of a return to the worldview of the ancient, eternal cosmos or to the irresponsibility of apolitical equanimity in the midst of political upheaval. Indeed, Beiner notes that "the common rap against Löwith" is that he is merely "an apostle of Stoic withdrawal"[239] – one for whom, in Wolin's words, "Stoic detachment can too readily be deployed as a pretext for simply avoiding taking a stand."[240] Löwith's apolitical orientation prior to 1933 seems to align with this ethos of stoic withdrawal – forced by circumstance to become aware of politics, Löwith resists, providing his prior naive retreat from politics with a philosophical backbone.

In this Chapter, I shift away from these common interpretations of Löwith as a stoic: As we will see, Löwith harbored no illusion that a classical (stoic-inflected) eternal cosmos could be a live possibility in the twentieth century. At the same time, the second aspect of stoicism foregrounded in the literature – that of a retreat from the world – comes closer to Löwith's own self-understanding, but similarly fails to adequately capture his politics and philosophy. Instead, I turn to the notion of "skepticism," a term that (in contrast to Stoicism) Löwith embraced as self-identification.[241] Skepticism for Löwith refers not primarily to the classical skeptical schools, but to a broader ethos of ceaseless investigation tempered by a humility with respect to the power of human understanding and action – an ethos that, I claim, Löwith developed in relation to Schmitt's decisionist orientation.

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[239] Ronald Beiner, *Political Philosophy*, p. 73

[240] Richard Wolin, *Heidegger's Children*, p. 98

[241] As Jayne Svenungsson notes, the ascription of stoicism to Löwith, particularly in those interpretations that focus on *Meaning in History*, are not immediately evident in Löwith's own assertions (though Svenungsson herself does adopt such an interpretation). See: Jayne Svenungsson, "A Secular Utopia."

As Sjoerd Griffioen notes, the polemic between Schmitt and Löwith has "remained largely underexposed in the secondary literature," in part because Löwith resisted Schmitt's attempts to engage in a more explicit exchange and because the critique of Löwith's "Occasional Decisionism" article has "more recently been declared outdated by commentators…because it supposedly fails to take the theological dimension of Schmitt's thought seriously."[242] In addition, the Löwith-Blumenberg debate has obscured the often-latent conflict between Schmitt and Löwith: Specifically, by drawing clear lines between adherents of secularization narratives and defenders of modernity, Blumenberg partially effaced the differences between Schmitt and Löwith on the relation between theological concepts/narratives and the modern world. Indeed, Blumenberg largely treats Löwith and Schmitt as comrades-in-arms against the legitimacy of the modern age, with the latter constituting the "strongest version of the secularization theorem" and the former possessing a "dogmatizing effect," popularizing secularization narratives and spreading them ever-further into culture and academia.[243] However, this alignment was far from predetermined. Indeed, as Grioffoen notes, "Schmitt himself believed that Löwith and Blumenberg formed a united front against him," each in different ways attacking elements of his political-theological decisionism.[244] Griffioen has usefully addressed one side of this lacuna, showing how Löwith's critique influenced the trajectory of Schmitt's later work. However, the reverse direction – Schmitt's influence on Löwith – has been largely ignored.

[242] Sjoerd Griffioen, *Contesting Modernity in the German Secularization Debate*, pp. 108–109

[243] Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age,* pp. 27, 92

[244] Sjoerd Griffoen, *Contesting Modernity in the German Secularization Debate,* p. 109

3. Löwith's Awakening: The Occasional Decisionism of Carl Schmitt

"The Occasional Decisionism of Carl Schmitt," first published anonymously in 1935, represents not only Löwith's first direct engagement with politics in his writing, but also a coming-to-terms with the triumph of Nazism through the emblematic figure of Schmitt, who was not only intellectually but also "politically influential." Schmitt's intellectual and political prominence raises the stakes of Löwith's critique, but it is the substance (or lack thereof) of Schmitt's concept of the political that he primarily targets. For Löwith, Schmitt's concept of the political requires some kind of substance to ground it as an active and foundational principle, but his occasionalist mentality is incapable of accepting transcendental or natural sources of such substance. Cortés and Cromwell, both cited by Schmitt as key examples of decisionism, did not ground their decision in nothingness, but rather in their Catholicism, which provided a higher authority and the "faith to decide *rightly*."[245] Löwith writes that:

> "Schmitt, in contrast, winds up in an ambiguous situation. In order to be able to establish his war-oriented concept of politics as something distinctive and independent, on the one hand he must seize upon a substantiality which no longer befits his own historical situation and from which enmity derives substantive content; on the other hand, as a modern, postromantic human who thinks far too occasionally to be able to believe in divinely willed and naturally given distinctions, he must again relativize these substantial presuppositions and shift his whole fundamental distinction back into a formal existentiality."[246]

According to Löwith, the theoretical necessity of some basic substance, combined with Schmitt's romantic ethos, results in a constant vacillation in Schmitt's concept of the political between

[245] Karl Löwith, "The Occasional Decisionism of Carl Schmitt," pp. 145, 151

[246] Ibid., p. 151

"a substantive and an occasional understanding of enmity and friendship."[247] And yet a sovereign decision requires a sovereign, which introduces the question of what unifies "the one who leads and those who obey him." In Schmitt's answer of "equality in kind," Löwith detects more than a hint of "*national* equality in the sense of race…[as the] foundation of shared existence." Schmitt's nihilistic formalism is therefore sustained by an "Aryan substantiality which gives it a semblance of content."[248]

For Löwith, however, in contrast to Schmitt, this national substance is itself empty – it cannot provide a genuine ground for decisions. It is interesting in this respect to note the difference in Schmitt's and Löwith's accounts of Cortés. As argued in the previous Chapter of this project, Cortés (along with de Maistre and others) represented for Schmitt the absolutizing of the decision and its independence from any grounding in a meaningful order, whether transcendental or sociological – the "reduction of the state to the moment of the decision, to…an absolute decision created out of nothingness."[249] In contrast, Löwith sees in Cortés not a total abdication of any absolute ground, but a persisting religious faith in the objectivity of values, and, consequently, a measure of the rightness or wrongness of decision independent of the will of the decider. Instead, in Löwith's critique, Schmitt himself becomes this emblem of empty decisionism. For Löwith, Schmitt's response to the meaninglessness of his own era is therefore doomed to fail. His occasionalist decisionism, untethered from any deeper grounding or higher authority, will merely amplify "the political situation which happens to prevail at the moment." In contrast to the eternal cosmos of the classical writers that

[247] Ibid.

[248] Ibid., pp. 154–155

[249] Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 66

Löwith is so fond of citing – and even in contrast to the counter-revolutionaries that Schmitt prefers – Schmitt does nothing more than "leav[e] human affairs in their corrupt condition.[250]

Löwith's "Occasional Decisionism" was an early and powerful critique of Schmitt's Weimar-era work along with his 1933 turn to Nazism – one that managed to trouble Schmitt for years after.[251] That said, we should view this article not as Löwith's final statement on Schmitt and his ilk, but as a beginning. Löwith leaves many threads hanging or underdeveloped in this brief article: While he is clear that Schmitt's genealogy of decisionism pointing to the counter-revolution is in error, his own account of the origins of decisionism is largely absent. Marx and Kierkegaard are briefly mentioned as key figures in this story, but neither relates directly to Schmitt's decisionism, as each still "had faith in a highest court of appeal…as the *measure* for their decision."[252] There is something fundamentally nihilistic and groundless about Schmitt's decisionism, but Löwith in this piece seems unsure as to the origin of this nihilism – not to mention how it was able to exceed Schmitt's own writings and capture an entire political movement and eventually an entire country. In addition, Löwith at various points juxtaposes decisionism to philosophical understanding, from which "arises an order of human affairs;"[253] but what orientation, analogous to Schmitt's occasional decisionist orientation, could make such understanding possible?

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[250] Ibid., p. 144

[251] See: Sjoerd Griffioen, *Contesting Modernity in the German Secularization Debate,* Ch. 3

[252] Karl Löwith, "The Occasional Decisionism of Carl Schmitt," p. 158

[253] Ibid.

Löwith may well have had in mind answers or hints of answers to these questions in 1935. However, what must have been clear to him was that the account he provided in "Occasional Decisionism" was a compass rather than a map: indicative of the necessary direction of future research rather than standing on its own as a guide to German fascism and its acolytes. Indeed, as we will see, it is precisely the questions raised but left unanswered in "Occasional Decisionism" that would most occupy Löwith's work from that point forward, eventually culminating in an expansive historical narrative covering five centuries of European history, though always with Schmitt and his curious nihilistic decisionism in the background.

4. Löwith on the Modern Age: The Classical and Christian Worlds

Löwith's account of the conditions of the modern world rests on his idiosyncratic (and, in the words of one scholar, "overstated")[254] interpretation of the classical Greek and Roman worldview and its separation from both the Christian and the modern worldview.[255] According to Löwith, the classical world is an "always-existing cosmos without beginning or end," with a distinct and "essential structure, order, and beauty" encompassing those "rational animals called men."[256] This orderly cosmos is ruled by a cycle of growth and decay – rather than applying merely to organic life, this

[254] James Dodd, *The Heresies of Jan Patočka: Phenomenology, History, and Politics* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2023), p. 128

[255] As a consequence of his brief exile in Japan (before arriving in the United States), Löwith also sometimes identifies this classical worldview with "Oriental thinking," though this identification is typically not directly relevant to the genealogies that structure his work. See, e.g., Karl Löwith, *My Life in Germany*, pp. 162–163. For an account of Löwith's thoughts on Japan and how his time there impacted his philosophy, see: Flavia Baldari, "Karl Löwith's Encounter with Japanese Philosophy," *European Journal of Japanese Philosophy* 4 (2019): 105–30; Rodolphe Gasché, "On an Eastward Trajectory Towards Europe," pp. 312–328

[256] Karl Löwith, "Heidegger: Problem and Background of Existentialism," in *Nature, History, and Existentialism*, ed. Arnold Levison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966), 30–50, p. 42

"natural law of becoming and disintegrating determined also their vision of the historical world" through the rise and fall of political powers.[257] Therefore, rather than the transient vicissitudes of historical existence, Löwith claims, the classical world believed that "that which is always the same and everlasting, as it appears year after year in the 'revolution' of the heavenly bodies, manifested a deeper truth."[258]

By subjecting human events to eternal, natural laws, the Greek cosmos created an inherent limitation in the classical world – an experience of "blind fate" opposed to the decisionism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: "In all 'decisive' questions of life, the Greeks and Romans did not consult their own conscience, the 'point of decision,' but oracles and signs."[259] This acquiescence to fate, along with the (interpretively contentious) cyclical sense of historical time,[260] meant that any concrete technological or cultural progress could not be projected into the future, but rather "falls under [the] supreme law of growth and decay in nature."[261] Instead of looking to the future for hope

[257] Karl Löwith, "Nature, History, and Existentialism," in *Nature, History, and Existentialism*, ed. Arnold Levison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966), 17–29, p. 23; Karl Löwith, "The Quest for the Meaning of History," in *Nature, History, and Existentialism*, ed. Arnold Levison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966), 131–44, p. 137

[258] Karl Löwith, "Nature, History, and Existentialism," p. 22–23

[259] Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, p. 33

[260] The idea of a cyclical classical temporality has long been contested by historians and classicists (e.g., Arnaldo Momigliano in 1966), but as W. Warren Wagar notes, this claim of classical cyclicality also formed part of the "orthodoxy" of many secularization narratives – particularly those related to progress and historical consciousness. I use it here in reconstructing Löwith's narrative without staking a position on its actual validity. See: W. Warren Wagar, "Modern Views of the Origins of the Idea of Progress," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 28, no. 1 (1967): 55–70, p. 64; Arnaldo Momigliano, "Time in Ancient Historiography," *History and Theory* 6 (1966): 1–23.

[261] Karl Löwith, "The Fate of Progress," in *Nature, History, and Existentialism*, ed. Arnold Levison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966), 145–61, p. 148

and fulfillment, the classical world believed that "within this orderly *cosmos*...man is capable of meeting every situation, even a hopeless one, with magnanimity."[262]

In contrast to the eternal Greek cosmos, the early Christian worldview imagined the cosmos not as eternal, but as finite: "the Fathers of the Church developed a theology of history from Judaic prophecies and Christian eschatology which extended from the Creation to the Last Judgement and Salvation."[263] This definite beginning and end, the finitude of earthly existence, created a framework for meaning within this world: Christian faith implies "a purposeful story of salvation...derived from the assumption that history is directed by a will and, therefore, toward a purpose and fulfillment."[264] Rather than eternal, cyclical growth and decay (à la the classical worldview), the Christian cosmos contained an end, considered both as a finality and as a purpose. This purpose, however, exists not within temporal world history (*Weltgeschichte*), but salvation history (*Heilsgeschichte*). On Löwith's account, as different as they are, the classical and Christian worldviews are therefore joined in two crucial respects: First, both recognize the transitory nature of worldly history: "It was as evident for Augustine as for Polybius that political empires are as mortal as individual men, though they may endure somewhat longer."[265] Second, the world in both the Christian and Classical view was "orderly," each providing a "definite place and status in the hierarchy of an eternal or created cosmos."[266] For

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[262] Karl Löwith, "Nature, History, and Existentialism," p. 23

[263] Karl Lowith, "The Quest for the Meaning of History," in *Nature, History, and Existentialism and Other Essays in the Philosophy of History*, ed. Arnold Levison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966), 131–44, p. 135

[264] Karl Löwith, "Nature, History, and Existentialism," p. 21

[265] Karl Löwith, "The Quest for Meaning in History," p. 138

[266] Karl Löwith, "Man between Infinities," in *Nature, History, and Existentialism*, ed. Arnold Levison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966), 102–15, p. 105

Löwith, these orderly worldviews could not be further from the nihilism and political evangelism that gave rise to Schmitt's decisionism and fascist politics broadly. He locates the initial breakdown of the orderly cosmos in the rise of the natural sciences and an ensuing existential mindset produced thereby.

4.1 Löwith on the Modern Age: Existentialism

Löwith's concept of existentialism is quite broad, extending, in terms of time and adherents, well beyond those canonical figures of the "twentieth-century philosophy of existence."[267] Indeed, for Löwith, existentialism is less a philosophy and more a condition of modern life – one associated with a loss of the stability and certainty that once attached to norms, beliefs, political forms, and the very structure of the natural world:

> "The fashion of existentialism is indeed more than a fashion, for it is shaping, with ultimate logic, the basic mood of modern man's worldly existence. We are all existentialists, some consciously, some willy-nilly, and some without knowing it, because we are all more or less caught in the predicament of being 'modern' by living in an epoch of dissolution of former beliefs and certainties."[268]

Löwith traces the rise of this existential condition of uncertainty to the refiguration of the world motivated by the natural-scientific, and especially astronomical, discoveries of the sixteenth century. In shifting humanity's conception of the natural world, these natural-scientific discoveries simultaneously shifted the context in which human endeavor unfolded. These discoveries, not least the decline of the geocentric model of the universe, eroded the older model of an "orderly *cosmos*," whether classical or Christian, and rendered human existence in the natural world entirely contingent.

[267] Arkadiusz Górnisiewicz, "Existentialism as a Political Problem in Karl Löwith's Thought," p. 4; Karl Löwith, "Man Between Infinities," p. 104

[268] Karl Löwith, "Heidegger: Problem and Background of Existentialism," p. 31

As a result, the "universe seemed to have lost all its harmony and stability...and man was lost in an incoherent world," affected by a sense of both "physical and metaphysical homelessness."[269]

Descartes drew out the existential implications of this new scientific worldview, distinguishing "man and world as *res cogitans* and *res extensa*," and, as a consequence, dividing the "modern consciousness" into "two different worlds of extreme subjectivity and objectivity."[270] In relation to the infinite natural world, humanity now appears insignificant, and thus the natural world seemed irrelevant to questions of human existence: "Kierkegaard states that the interest in existence is wholly opposed to a possible interest in the laws of the natural world," which appears only as the "hidden background of man's forlorn existence."[271] As a consequence, nature and humanity become conceptually quarantined within meditations on existence:

> "The world which is concretely analyzed by contemporary existentialism is neither a living *cosmos* seen with Greek eyes, nor an order of creation, as understood by Christian faith; nor is it the world of mathematical physics. It is only our historical world of selfhood and interhuman relations, in short, a world without nature."[272]

This, then, is the essence of existentialism for Löwith: a disconnection with the orderly worlds of the classical living cosmos and the Christian divinely ordained cosmos, such that "man has no definite place and nature within the natural universe" and thus believes the natural world to be irrelevant to all questions of human life beyond trivial amusements: "For some people, the only link

[269] Karl Löwith, "Nature, History, and Existentialism," pp. 24–25

[270] Karl Löwith, "Man Between Infinities," pp. 106–107

[271] Karl Löwith, "Nature, History, and Existentialism," pp. 26–27

[272] Ibid., p. 28

which still connects the firmament with humanity is the horoscope."[273] The classical world viewed historical events as contingent and transitory and thus directed their attention to the eternal workings of the natural world. The Christian worldview gave humanity a definite place within a created and divine universe and drew thought to this divinity and to the expectation of a future salvation independent of temporal history. For Löwith, the remaking of the world through natural science redirected attention not outward to the eternal universe or the eternal creator, but to human endeavor itself, radically elevating its importance.

Existentialism may have initially set humanity on the path to the crises of the twentieth century, but in Löwith's narrative, it serves merely as a stepping stone – Schmitt was not an existentialist, but an "active nihilist;" and the Third Reich was founded not through a Revolution of Existentialism, but a "Revolution of Nihilism." The full implications of the existentialist worldview would only emerge in its relation to nihilism: Whereas existentialism was merely a sense of groundlessness and placelessness, nihilism extends this by superimposing a narrative of decay on existing politics, society, and culture.

4.2 Löwith on the Modern Age: Nihilism

Löwith's account of the rise of nihilism is bound up with his account of the decline of "the religious and moral unity" of Europe, beginning in religion with the Protestant Reformation and in politics with the French Revolution, the latter of which sought a "clean sweep of the past." Out of this apparent discontinuity emerged a widespread sense of decadence that structured history,

[273] Karl Löwith, "Man Between Infinites," p. 106–107

literature, philosophy, and beyond. Indeed, Löwith's list of figures who partook in this sentiment of corruption reads as a who's who of nineteenth-century luminaries. Among others, Barthold Georg Niebuhr and Jacob Burckhardt prophesied an "impending barbarism" and an ironclad "despotism," respectively. Bruno Bauer feared that "imperialist dictatorships would dominate Europe," while Pierre-Joseph Proudhon lamented his fate to die amidst "depression" and "blood bath." In literature, Baudelaire and Flaubert provided the "most sophisticated expression" of this nihilistic, "Luciferian fall into nothingness." In short, Löwith says, "Nihilism as the disavowal of existing civilization was the only real belief of all truly educated people at the beginning of the twentieth century."[274]

Löwith is careful to emphasize, however, that not all nihilisms are identical. Adopting and elaborating Nietzsche's (still somewhat ambiguous) sketch of the two forms of nihilism in *The Will to Power*,[275] Löwith distinguishes between a "romantic" nihilism of despair in the face of meaninglessness and an "active nihilism" that embraces meaninglessness as the precondition for willing new values and forms of life: "Nihilism, as such, can have two meanings: it can be a symptom of final and complete downfall and aversion to existence; but it can also be a first symptom of recovery and a new will for existence—a nihilism of weakness or of strength."[276] Much of the nihilism of the nineteenth century, Löwith suggests, was of the romantic, passive variety, a paralyzing, despairing orientation to all that

[274] Karl Löwith, "The Historical Background of European Nihilism," in *Nature, History, and Existentialism*, ed. Arnold Levison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966), 3–16, pp. 3–10

[275] On the interpretative difficulty of Nietzsche's thin typology of nihilism, see: Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 28–30, 275n.16; Gianni Vattimo, "Nihilism: Reactive and Active," in *Nietzsche and the Rhetoric of Nihilism: Essays on Interpretation, Language and Politics*, ed. Tom Darby, Béla Egyed, and Ben Jones (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1989), 15–21.

[276] Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, p. 190; See also: Karl Lowith, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, trans. Harvey J. Lomax (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 50–51

exists. The pivotal figure in shifting nihilism from a passive to an active footing was, appropriately, Nietzsche, who "definitely turn[ed] the romantic nihilism of weakness into one of strength…[and] set for himself the task of pushing the feeling of inanity and aimlessness of all existence to that extreme point where it should reverse itself into the will to new values."[277]

This turn from passivity to activity occurs in three stages. In the first stage, the death of God and the decline of divinely sanctioned values "leads logically to the 'interim condition' of European nihilism." Where "Christian gravity" had once provided an account of "why one is there at all, for the sake of what goals," existence itself now seemed "only a fleeting, meaningless accident."[278] Eternal recurrence is at the same time the most extreme "form of nihilism" and an overcoming of nihilism – it renders the meaninglessness of existence endless, without goal and thus without purpose; but eternal recurrence also "gives man's existence 'the new gravity' after man has lost the old gravity that he had in the Christian faith," likewise serving as a "'counterweight' against the will to the nothing." As Christianity once held closed the "'door to suicidal nihilism,'" now this function is taken up by the will to eternal recurrence:

> "The will to the eternal recurrence of all existence is thus a 'self-overcoming of nihilism,' because by means of this will man overcomes the idea of the final: self-destruction…For in courage toward the nothing, nihilism finally completes and overcomes itself to the point of the excess courage of the superman."[279]

[277] Karl Löwith, "The Historical Background of European Nihilism," p. 13

[278] Karl Löwith, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, pp. 47–52

[279] Ibid., pp. 56–59

Only from this new center of gravity, Nietzsche suggests, can humanity make the decision to fully overcome nihilism and will new values – to "decide whether they want to descend to the last man or to ascend to the overcoming of man."[280] On Löwith's interpretation, Nietzsche thereby attempted to provide a counterweight to meaninglessness following the death of God through a recovery of the"lost world of the Greek cosmos."[281] This attempt, however, was doomed to "philosophical shipwreck" because it attempted to recover the eternal cosmos through a paradigmatically modern and nihilistic will and decision. If the cosmos recurs without goal or purpose, "what sense would it then still make to want to get above oneself...to 'will' anything at all?"[282] Nietzsche's attempted recovery of a "lost world" – analogous to the narratives of progress that Löwith criticizes in *Meaning in History* – awkwardly combines classical and modern worldviews and thus fails to both revive the former and adequately respond to the latter: "In this attempt to philosophize over a distance of two millennia, [Nietzsche] remains tied both to the positivism and to the nihilism of his century, in the vain effort to unite at a new depth two separated yet corresponding spheres, namely the sphere of an unchanging quantum of forces and the sphere of the nihilistic energy of modern existence."[283]

Despite this philosophical shipwreck, however, Nietzsche nonetheless succeeded in providing a new set of possibilities for European nihilism – one that shifted from nihilism as a spirit of decay

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[280] Ibid., pp. 85–86

[281] Karl Löwith, "Nature, History, and Existentialism," p. 27

[282] As Charles Bambach puts it, "Nietzsche's attempt to resurrect the ancient Heraclitean notion of eternal return proved unworkable because because it betrayed its pagan roots for a neo-Christian/Kantian form of ethics that depended on human decision making." See: Charles Bambach, "Rethinking the 'Existential' Nietzsche in Germany," pp. 319–320

[283] Karl Löwith, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, pp. 88–95

and demise to nihilism as an "active" spirit of the willful destruction of old orders and values and the creation of new ones. This active nihilism, Löwith makes clear, is not a mere intellectual or literary curiosity, but rather the prerequisite for the rise of German fascism and its "Revolution of Nihilism." While Nietzsche himself "is alien both to the 'national' and to the 'social,'" he nonetheless created the groundwork for catastrophe: "Nietzsche's ideas paved the way to the Third Reich. He did not himself walk that way, but like all pathmakers, prepared it for the others"[284] – including, most importantly, his fellow active nihilist Carl Schmitt.

However, nihilism, particularly in its active form, owes its force and uptake not just to political and religious splinterings (emblemitized by the French Revolution and Reformation, respectively), but also to the elimination of the inherent limitations in the orderly classical and Christian worldviews. This development Löwith analyzes through the lens of infinite progress narratives – a characteristically modern belief that shares a common origin with existentialism and both provides the temporal preconditions of nihilism and foregrounds human history as a site of political salvation.

4.3 Löwith on the Modern Age: Progress

Of all the topics that consumed his work, Löwith's thoughts on progress, most substantively articulated in *Meaning in History*, are arguably the best-known. On this account, modern philosophies of history secularize the Christian story of salvation, interpreting worldly history as having a definite direction and purpose that grants meaning to the individual human endeavors and suffering that it encompasses. At the same time, however, such narratives also selectively incorporate

[284] Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, p. 200; Karl Löwith, "The Historical Background of European Nihilism," p. 16

aspects of classical temporality and historical thought: Whereas the Christian salvation story has a definite beginning and end (creation and the eschatological Second Coming, respectively), modern philosophies of history replace this with the eternal cosmic conception of the classical world, a continuous process with no beginning or end. However, rather than the cyclical classical temporality, by which every advance would be eventually balanced by decline, modern philosophies of history adopt a Christian linear temporality, making thinkable an endless progress towards future worldly salvation, as well as endless decay towards inescapable catastrophe. As a result, modern philosophies of history not only conflate *Heilsgeschichte* and *Weltgeschichte* (salvation history and world history), but also untenably hybridize the Christian and classical worldviews: "The modern mind has not made up its mind whether it should be Christian or pagan. It sees with one eye of faith and one of reason. Hence its vision is necessarily dim in comparison with either Greek or biblical thinking."[285]

Meaning in History, while typically mild in its political polemics, was clearly intended as a critique of totalitarian ideologies and mass movements, which see in history their salvation and in dictatorial figures their saviors.[286] Beyond this, however, attending to Löwith's often-overlooked comments about decline (as an inverted notion of progress) and reading these in the context of his broader account of modernity reveals the persistence of Schmitt's spectre and those themes that first emerged for Löwith in his engagement with Schmitt's decisionism.

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[285] Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History*, p. 207

[286] This comes through most explicitly in Löwith's discussion of Joachim of Flora: "The third dispensation of the Joachites reappeared as a third International and a third *Reich*, inaugurated by a *dux* or a *Führer* who was acclaimed as a savior and greeted by millions with *Heil*!" See: Ibid., p. 159

The distinction between technological and moral/cultural progress so important to Schmitt is also recognized by Löwith. As a co-keynote speaker at a 1962 conference (opposite Theodore Adorno),[287] Löwith frames technological progress as both the transformation of the natural world and as itself a core element of human nature: "All progress, then, is originally a progress in the appropriation of nature, in which man takes control of nature." The "artifice" by which man does this, however, is "as natural to man as the automatic processes of organic life, because he cannot live a human existence without cultivating his environment."[288] This form of progress is therefore "an integral part of the history of human existence," but one that does not depend on some faith in inevitable and endless future progress, nor in a progress that transcends the technological realm and shifts into moral or cultural progress. The classical writers, with whom Löwith very much claims an identity, knew progress in all its forms to fall "under [the] supreme law of growth and decay" and that "all new achievements also bring new dangers and evils." Nihilistic narratives of decay combine this classical awareness of the dangers created by technological progress with a Christian unidirectional notion of time – theories of progress towards future perfection were "transform[ed]...into theories of decay which look upon progress as something negative."[289]

For a figure like Nietzsche, this awareness of decay spurred an (ultimately confused, Löwith suggests) attempt to embrace this necessity and actively will the inescapable fate of modernity, leading

[287] On Löwith's and Adorno's dueling keynotes and the relation between them, see: Victor Weisbrod, "A Missed Connection: Löwith and Adorno on Progress," *Thesis Eleven* 165, no. 1 (2021): 10–36. Ironically, this conference also marked the first appearance of the presentation that would later become Blumenberg's *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*.

[288] Karl Löwith, "The Fate of Progress," p. 147

[289] Ibid., pp. 148–150

him paradoxically to the "active nihilism" of willing new values. Löwith is clear in *Meaning in History* that such an outcome is not limited to Nietzsche alone. Oswald Spengler is, "like Nietzche," caught between willing and loving the "inescapable fate of decline" and deciding on "a future, still open to possibilities." For Löwith, it is not coincidental that, within Spengler's bibliography, the passive nihilism of the *Decline of the West* is followed by the active nihilism of *The Hour of Decision.*[290]

Nihilism in both its forms here emerges as deeply intertwined with progress narratives – a sense of decay projected into the indefinite future, an inverse progress narrative, is precisely the sentiment that consumed Niebuhr, Proudhon, Nietzsche, and Löwith's other apostles of nihilism. Furthermore, progress narratives and existentialism share a common origin for Löwith, both emerging from the destruction of the classical natural world. The rise of notions of progress "as a universal fact" is associated, like existentialism, with natural-scientific discoveries of the seventeenth century: "Modern physical science is a power which changes and destroys tradition," and as such, it also changes our conception of history. No longer "the occurrence of change within a world that has a stable natural order," history now wholly disregards the natural order and becomes, like the world analyzed by existentialists, the wholly human, inter-personal world – "everything which, for us, *is the world* is drawn into the historical progress."[291]

Löwith's diagnosis of the conditions of the modern age thus encompasses an interconnected set of developments: Existentialism as the spirit of the age leaves humanity without definite place or purpose and human existence without given meaning. With the modern divorce from the inherent

[290] Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History*, pp. 11–12

[291] Karl Löwith, "The Fate of Progress," pp. 155–156

limitations of both the cyclical cosmos and bounded created world, this existentialism tipped into nihilism – despair in the face of infinite political and cultural decay as an inverted belief in progress – and eventually into the active nihilism of Nietzsche and later Schmitt. Through Löwith's characterization of Nietzsche as making a "decision" to will new values, we can begin to discern the connection between these developments and the Schmittian decisionism that set him on this investigative trajectory. However, for Löwith, it is crucial that decisionism itself did not originate with Schmitt, nor is decisionism necessarily marked by the active nihilism with which Schmitt imbues it.

4.4 Löwith on the Modern Age: Decisionism

Against Schmitt's genealogy giving preference to the counterrevolutionary writers, Löwith introduces Kierkegaard and Marx as the two mirrored originators of modern decisionism. In different ways, these two figures each rebelled against the system of mediations and reconciliations Hegel presented – and against his "unity of essence and existence," each asserted, as Sartre would later put it, that "existence precedes essence."[292] Marx assaults Hegel's "mediation between bourgeois society and the state," emphasizing the still-unresolved "contradiction between private-egoistic and public-communal existence" and seeking to overcome this through a communist society in which individuals are publicly, rather than privately, determined: This represents the only "true resolution of conditions of existence which have no essence, the social identity of essential reason with the real existence of human beings."[293] Kierkegaard, on the other hand, wholly rejects Hegel's reconciliation of universal

[292] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, ed. John Kulka, trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 20

[293] Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche,* pp. 137–147

essence and particular existence, with the former describing not "a 'real' existence, but rather only an ideal 'abstract existence.'" On Löwith's account, Kierkegaard dismisses any inquiry into "*essentia* apart from *existentia*," instead reintroducing "the 'contingent' or even 'miraculous'" fact of mere existence that "Hegel excludes from the notion of reality."[294]

Whereas Hegel had sought to unify and reconcile disparate "contrasts of existence, making of them one essence: bourgeois society and the state, the state and Christendom," Marx and Kierkegaard again separated these, with Marx proclaiming the contradiction of bourgeois society and the state and Kierkegaard the incompatibility of Christianity and bourgeois society. At the same time, neither any longer "look upon existence as Hegel did:...as the appearance of an internal essence in the appropriate form of existence." Lacking such assurance of essential rectitude and having torn apart Hegel's unities, Marx and Kierkegaard, rather than "justifying philosophically that which merely happens to exist," each now demanded a decision on the basis of the newly-rent Hegelian reconciliations. For Kierkegaard, this decision is the individual either/or of the leap of faith as a decision for a genuine "life as a Christian," or for existential despair as a lost individual within "Christianity made superficial in the spread of historical Christendom."[295] For Marx, it is the collective decision of the workers of the world to unite and re-make their existence:

> "For Kierkegaard, [the decision] is a retreat to individual existence which makes decisions according to conscience; for Marx, it is an advance to a political decision of circumstances considered en masse. Because of an identical hostility toward Hegel's rational world, they separate once more what he had put together. Marx decides for a humanitarian, "human" world, and Kierkegaard for an otherworldly Christianity...In

[294] Ibid., pp. 147–150

[295] Ibid., pp. 150–152

> place of Hegel's active spirit, Marx substituted a theory of social practice, and Kierkegaard a reflection of inner activity."[296]

This decisionism is so crucial to the modern mind that Löwith places it alongside the decline of gencentrism and rise of a natural-scientific objectification of the natural world as a crucial inception point of modern existentialism: "With this rebellion of Marx and Kierkegaard against Hegel's synthesis, modern existentialism begins, so far as an immediate historic filiation can be traced. Actually, modern existentialism began as early as the seventeenth century, with the Cartesian revolution in the conception of the world and its impact upon Pascal's thought about man's condition in it."[297] In other words, with Kierkegaard and Marx came the fulfillment of that process of intellectual refiguration started by Galileo and Copernicus in astronomy and by Descartes in philosophy – decisionism, for Löwith, is the logical conclusion of an existential world: a world devoid of higher order and a humanity devoid of a definite, given place.

Indeed, as Löwith claims in a supplement attached to later publications of "Occasional Decisionism," decisionism in all its forms (theological, philosophical, political) is grounded in "the staunch conviction that all traditional goods and orderings, contents and measures, and the equating of the 'world' with the historical human world, which is implicitly contained in these, have become null and void."[298] However, here as elsewhere Löwith distinguishes the existential decisionism of past figures like Kierkegaard and the nihilistic decisionism of Schmitt. Kierkegaard demanded an

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[296] Ibid., p. 161

[297] Karl Löwith, "Heidegger: Problem and Background of Existentialism," p. 49

[298] Karl Löwith, "The Occasional Decisionism of Carl Schmitt," p. 169

"existential decision as a 'corrective' to his age," but, on Löwith's account, he disavowed the idea that such a "temporally conditioned corrective could serve as a norm." In contrast, in Schmitt's "active nihilism," the decision was precisely the path towards the creation of new norms ex nihilo.[299]

Through this diagnosis of modernity, combining, in various ways, existentialism, nihilism, progress narratives, and decisionism and consuming much of his post-1935 work, Löwith attempted to complete the project he had begun in "Occasional Decisionism" – to comprehend the philosophical, political, and cultural backdrop of Schmitt's decisionistic politics. However, the conclusions of this investigation may have seemed a bit disquieting: Schmitt's nihilistic decisionism was the result not of an individual pathology, but a much broader spirit of the age – one that would not vanish with the collapse of the Third Reich. How, then, could the individual protect themself from succumbing to this spirit, collapsing into either an inert, despairing attitude or an arrogant attempt to create meaning and value ex nihilo? The answer Löwith finds in an attitude of skepticism: an orientation that, in every respect, stands diametrically opposed to Schmitt's decisionism.

5. Skepticism against Decisionism

Owing to its primary target, *Meaning in History* largely treats skepticism as joined with faith in a common struggle against philosophies of history and their "easy reading of history and its meaning." Indeed, faith and skepticism are not merely joined in "common opposition" to such philosophies of history, but also produce similar orientations to life and history: the skeptical "resignation…in the face of the incalculability and unpredictability of historical issues" constitutes the "worldly brother of

[299] Ibid.

devotion."[300] In later works, however, Löwith would sharply distinguish between skepticism and faith, decisively casting his lot with the former.

As with many other themes with which he engages, Löwith distinguishes between a classical notion of skepticism and a modern one. Classical skepticism was a search, through "keen observation and investigation," that aimed at a truth beyond doubt, even if in practice (as in the Socratic dialogues) such searches always ended "inconclusively." Recognizing the relativity all things (e.g., the great relative to the small, health relative to disease, value relative to viewpoint) the classical skeptic "investigator" (*skeptomai*) abjures any claims to unquestionable truth in philosophical endeavor, while "in pursuing his practical life, he holds no decided opinions."[301] This lack of certainty in practical matters (as well as philosophical) does not mean that the classical skeptic is paralyzed when presented with a concrete choice: "in a given situation, everybody will have to decide in this or that way, without theoretical certainty." But these are mere "practical decisions" that recognize uncertainty and do not pretend to certainty, nor do they attempt to "settle the matter philosophilcally."[302]

Skepticism in this classical world responded to a broader ethos of certainty in fundamental questions, attempting to challenge, displace, and overturn this innocent surety. For this reason, modern skepticism can never align perfectly with classical skepticism – the "certainty" of the ancient world has given way to an existential groundlessness, a sense of the world having no definite order and

[300] Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History*, pp. vi, 199

[301] Karl Löwith, "Skepticism and Faith," in *Nature, History, and Existentialism*, ed. Arnold Levison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966), 116–30, pp. 118–119, 122

[302] Ibid., p. 120

thus no platform from which absolute truth could be attained: "If anything characterizes our intellectual situation, it is that we have become conscious of not being in possession of the truth, whereas former ages honestly believed that they possessed it."[303]

As such, the modern age lacks a Socrates-like figure, a "great skeptic…able to charm the youth" without ossifying the "findings" of the skeptical search into a system or dogma. Amidst the existential ethos of the post-Copernican world, an awareness of a lack of strong foundations and absolute truths drives individuals further into a demand for certainty and intellectual security. As a result, skeptical doubt can no longer hope that its search could, in principle, end in truth – it hits, as in Kierkegaard, a "dead end," and spills not into a tranquil "ataraxy," but a desperate and passionate despair. Moreover, in a context in which existential questions appeared to have neither given answers nor the hope of reaching an answer through searching, Kierkegaard rejected the classical coexistence of theoretical doubt with practical decision-making. It is no longer enough to contemplate as a skeptic:

> "One has to doubt 'in earnest"…and try to 'exist' as a skeptic. It is possible to doubt theoretically, without committing oneself to it, but it is impossible to despair without being fully engaged in it. Despair is totally what theoretical doubt is only partially. Doubt moves with the difference between a theoretical and a practical attitude; despair is comprehensive…The skeptic, says Kierkegaard, must be caught in the practical, ethical realm, because it is much worse to act when we are uncertain than to state our doubt theoretically."[304]

It is through this extension of doubt into despair and the collapsing of the distinction between contemplation and action that one is faced with the Kierkegaardian decision – either for Christianity

[303] Ibid., p. 122

[304] Ibid., pp. 117, 125–126

in the leap of faith, or for the now-hopeless despair of skepticism. Faith therefore begins where skepticism ends: "he who really believes is no longer searching."[305]

If for the ancients, skepticism is a pursuit of truth defined by continuous doubt and requiring no rupture, then for the moderns, it is a pursuit of truth doomed from the start – one that, to achieve its end, must negate itself and leap into faith. Outside of faith, certainty of truth can only be "second-rate" – in a context of modern existentialism, in which "everything in the world and in the human condition is so profoundly uncertain," the true philosophical skeptic must reject the notion of certainty. Compounding this is are the heightened stakes of skepticism in modernity – as Löwith, favorably citing Pascal, notes, the uncertainties of the classical world are dwarfed by the "fundamental decisions" facing humanity today: "Compared with them, all the uncertainties which classical skeptics have demonstrated are of minor importance," and consequently, the demand for certainty through faith becomes all the stronger. This dynamic of faith and skepticism dogged Nietzsche. His "religious passion for the absolute" meant that he could only take his skepticism so far before succumbing to decisionism, making a leap of faith and refiguring doubt into new truths and new foundations.[306]

Löwith therefore frames skepticism as the antithesis of decisionism. Whereas both in the modern age recognize the ultimate groundlessness of values and social forms, the latter takes this to be an unacceptable state of affairs and seeks to establish a new foundation on the basis of nothing but an individual decision bereft of any firmer grounding or higher court of appeal. The former, in contrast,

[305] Ibid., p. 123

[306] Ibid., pp. 129–130

takes this ultimate groundlessness as an invitation to adopt only moderate, humble, and tentative claims, constantly aware that the frailty of human actions means that "the most grandiose decisions and efforts may result...in an ordinary destiny."[307] For Löwith, the opposite of decisionism is skepticism, because the true skeptic is skeptical not just with respect to the claims and beliefs of others, but also with respect to himself: "He is intentionally irresolute and undecided, the opposite of a 'decisionist' who insists on a resolute decision, whether right or wrong, because he lacks objective wisdom." As skepticism, in the vein of Socrates, is itself the essence of philosophy, the rise of decisionism is symptomatic of a broader flight of theoretical contemplation from the modern age. Indeed, the general ethos of existentialism in the twentieth century means that skepticism is here fighting a losing battle: "At this point, one cannot abstain from asking about our own state of wisdom when even within philosophy we are told, by pragmatists and existentialists, to substitute 'decision' for insight. It seems that in spite of all our practical skepticism we have become thorough doctrinarians."[308]

The opposition between decisionism and genuine skepticism runs throughout Löwith's work. In *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, he claims that two paths have emerged to escape "historical skepticism:" the sense that historical study is capable of producing at best partial accounts of the past, relative to perspective and ideology and distorted through "wishful thinking...special pleading and stupidity, cowardice and lies." The first is a rejection of historical truth and a self-knowing return to

[307] Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History*, p. 25

[308] Karl Löwith, "Skepticism and Faith," pp. 119–121

mythological and legendary narrative. The second path is walked by those who "stiff[en] their subjective standpoint into a dogma and their distaste of objective knowledge into the will to 'decide' and 'judge.'"[309] Similarly, Löwith closes his comparative study of Heidegger and the theologian Franz Rosenzweig by reflecting on their dueling conceptions of eternity. For Heidegger, "the 'meaning' of Being [is] finite time and eternity [is] an illusion," whereas Rosenzweig's faith allowed him to "affirm the Star of David as the eternal truth." These polarized positions, Löwith reminds us, do not necessitate an either-or choice:

> "Only those who are too weak to resist apodictic pronouncements will find the answer that Heidegger and Rosenzweig give about eternity and time an either-or about which a choice must be made in order to reach a decision…the mind is only inquiring insofar as and so long as it maintains a skeptical attitude towards the limits of the knowable. 'Skepticism' is the philosophical position which, instead of proposing extreme questions that are necessarily aimed at dogmatic solutions, sets forth the *problems as problems* clearly and upholds their problematic character – without giving in to hasty solutions."[310]

5.1 Skepticism and Impossibility of Return

Most interpretations of Löwith as advocating a return to a cyclical stoic conception of the natural world draw this interpretation from the final pages of *Meaning in History*, in which Löwith juxtaposes the modern conception of time as a linear and continuous, without beginning or end, with the classical cyclical conception of time: "Reason prefers to believe in the dependable continuity of the 'historical process'…To be theoretically consistent, however the trust in continuity would have to

[309] Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, p. 227

[310] Karl Löwith, "M. Heidegger and F. Rosenzweig: A Postscript to Being and Time," in *Nature, History, and Existentialism*, ed. Arnold Levison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966), 51–78, p. 78

come back to the classical theory of a *circular* movement; for only on the basis of a circular, endless movement, without beginning and end, is continuity really demonstrable."[311] This statement, however, should be read not as advocating a return to classical temporality, but rather as a claim of philosophical consistency. It effectively recapitulates Löwith's key contention in the book: that the modern age confusedly mixes the classical and the Christian. This claim, however, in no way implies the possibility of a return to the past. Indeed, if we look beyond the final few pages of *Meaning in History*, we see that Löwith is quite clear not only that "there is no return in time,"[312] but also that such an attempted return is a product of the paradigmatically modern error of groundless decisionism.

For Löwith, decisionism à la Schmitt can never serve as a proper remedy for the existential nihilism of modernity, even in the face of the substantial discomfort produced by remaining "forever nailed on the cross of contingency, absurdity, and total displacement." This is the case because, on Löwith's account, the two alternatives to this each require a conscious decision – one may either view the world as "an immutable natural order" in line with the classical cosmos, or as a "divine creation" in line with Judeo-Christian faith. Neither option succeeds in escaping modernity because each takes what in past eras was given and turns it into an existential choice:

> "choosing between the one or the other 'project'...would still be an existential attitude and decision and therefore contradictory to the nature of the chosen world-view. For neither of them is a mere project of human choice and decision. The one is revealed and intelligible only to faith; the other, too, is revealed, though not by historical revelation but in and by nature itself to the nature of man. We cannot choose not to be modern."[313]

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[311] Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History*, p. 207

[312] Karl Löwith, *My Life in Germany*, p. 146

[313] Karl Löwith, "Heidegger: Problem and Background of Existentialism," p. 49. See also: Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History*, p. 189: "The Christian faith, as expressed in the earliest creeds, neither is concerned with an isolated future or past, nor can it be reduced to an existential 'decision' in an ever present instant."

The impossibility of reviving a past mode of life also comes through in Löwith's account of technological progress. Even as such progress comes to be revalued from celebration to despair, it remains an ineradicable aspect of twentieth-century life – even those cynical about the effects of such technological advances and who would never view it (à la the secularization thesis) as a source of redemption "can neither do without them nor escape from their influence." Indeed, echoing other post-War critiques of instrumental rationality, Löwith claims that progress itself has attained a kind of perverse autonomy: "we can no longer stop it or turn it around."[314] Given that, for Löwith, modern technology relies upon a particular existential conception of nature separate from humanity, the inescapability of modern technology also implies the impossibility of a return to a classical worldview.

Indeed, Löwith not only abjures attempts to revive the eternal, classical world in his own work, but he actively dismisses such attempts by other writers: Of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, he writes: "It is not directly the eternity at which they aimed that is convincing, but rather the critique of time with which they started. Something so old and yet always so new as eternity cannot easily be revived again, even with the most modern techniques."[315] Recalling Löwith's comments on Nietzsche's doomed attempt to recover a notion of eternal recurrence through a modern nihilistic will, we might add that the classical world cannot be revived *especially* with the most modern techniques. Just as Nietzsche and Spengler cannot sensibly will the nihilism and decline that is predetermined, neither can Löwith see in

[314] Karl Löwith, "The Fate of Progress," pp. 150, 160–161

[315] Karl Löwith, "M. Heidegger and F. Rosenzweig," p. 78

frail human endeavor the possibility of such a seismic shift as the intentional return to the natural world of the classical eternal cosmos.

Absent the return of a classical world, what then is the "order of human affairs"[316] to which skeptical understanding gives rise? Löwith's answer is both intentionally humble and piecemeal, appearing as scattered, terse statements across many of his writings. In his memoirs, Löwith writes of his colleagues and friends in Germany, many of whom have proposed "radical solution[s]…whether it be in the sense of a return to Jewishness, or a decision for Christianity, or even a political dogma." In contrast, Löwith rejects these returns and decisions as "blind obduracies" and advocates a political mildness: "Life and the coexistence of people and nations are not such that they are feasible without patience and forbearance, skepticism and resignation."[317] The opposite of such skepticism is the evangelical drive to spread the spiritless and "annihilating civilization" of Europe "over the entire earth" – a gross bastardization of legitimate and healthy cross-cultural exchange through "writing and teaching."[318] A skeptical awareness of the "frailty of all human activities" requires recognizing the human culture, ideas, values, and social structures can never claim legitimate universality. From this simple principle emerges an acceptance of difference and a demand for coexistence.

A rejection of evangelizing and an embrace of only relative truths is mirrored in Löwith's rejection of the Schmittian total state and total enemy.[319] In fact, Löwith in general casts a skeptical eye

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[316] Karl Löwith, "The Occasional Decisionism of Carl Schmitt," p. 158

[317] Karl Löwith, *My Life in Germany*, p. 147

[318] Karl Löwith, "European Nihilism," p. 234; Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History*, p. 202–203

[319] Löwith in his memoirs gives an account of a speech by Schmitt in Rome after Löwith had fled there in 1934: "The central point of his lecture was as consistent as it was despicable: the 'total state' originated in 'total war.' A total

on state politics. Against Schmitt's claim that the state possess the "right to demand from its own members the readiness to die and unhesitatingly to kill enemies" when faced with an "existential" threat to the nation, Löwith asserts that "The historical greatness of a nation does not make up for the annihilation of one single individual, nor are nations as such entitled to permanent existence."[320]

As Löwith makes clear, the true skeptic is skeptical with regard not only to the positions of others but also to their own, recognizing "the relativity of all things to inner and outer situations, to different customs, laws, doctrines, philosophies, and creeds."[321] From this understanding emerges a conservative moderation in all human matters: an unwillingness to suppose oneself (or any human) to be great enough to bend history to their will, a reticence to evangelize culture, customs, and values, and a core political principle that foregrounds not the exceptional case of war, but a mundane, unspectacular commitment to peaceful coexistence and cross-cultural exchange. The simplicity of these prescriptions, along with their typical placement in the final few sentences of his works, may make them read like afterthoughts. However, for Löwith, these simple, unelaborated statements reflect an equally simple truth that Löwith arrays against the sophisticated "dogmatic system[s]" of existence and politics that he lambasts from Hegel to Schmitt[322] – a basic principle of skeptical humility towards

war, however, also required a 'total enemy,' and the 'immorality' of the last war had consisted in the fact that it was waged without a total enemy." See: Karl Löwith, *My Life in Germany*, p. 91

[320] Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 46; Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History*, p. 25

[321] Karl Löwith, "Skepticism and Faith," p. 120

[322] Ibid., p. 123

history-making and human action that would not be served by theoretical elaboration. As Löwith himself puts it: "what is essential is something simple – for me, perhaps, something all too simple."[323]

6. Conclusion

Löwith's positive politics certainly are extremely thin. It may be this very thinness that has caused many commentators to see in his work a more robust return to cyclical temporality: Surely there must be more to Löwith's politics, particularly given the catastrophes of the twentieth century, than these empty canards about coexistence. What this desire to find a more robust political program misses, however, is that for Löwith, the catastrophes of the twentieth century were the result not of inaction, but action; not of conservative withdrawal, but attempts to radically re-make the world; and not of quite moderation, but eschatological fury. It was through Schmitt that Löwith first began to consider the nihilistic contemporary politics of Germany, and Schmitt's nihilistic decisionism remained a core guide to Löwith's broader investigation of the modern conditions of fascism. Any decision made by Löwith in favor of the classical world would ignore the frailty of human action, for "[man's] designs and decisions" remain perpetually subject to "the wasteful economy of history which engulfs them, tosses them, and swallows them."[324] Nietzsche's own attempt to revive the doctrine of eternal recurrence "paved the way to the Third Reich" though he himself "did not walk that way."[325]

[323] Karl Lowith, "The Nature of Man and the World of Nature: For Heidegger's 80th Birthday," in *Martin Heidegger: In Europe and America*, ed. Edward G. Ballard and Charles E. Scott, trans. R. Philip O'Hara (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), 37–46. p. 46

[324] Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History*, p. vi

[325] Karl Löwith, "The Historical Background of European Nihilism," p. 16

For Löwith, the lesson is clear: To respond to nihilism with a decision is to welcome an unpredictable and possibly catastrophic cascade of consequences.

Whereas Schmitt framed the management of meaning through its sanctioning, regulation, and even elimination (in the form of a "domestic enemy") as a crucial aspect of politics, Löwith views such decisionist management as an untenable arrogance doomed to fail in more-or-less spectacular and catastrophic ways. Eric Voegelin was deeply influenced by Löwith's account, and he incorporated many of Löwith's key claims into his mid-century work. However, Voegelin's metaphysical grounding caused him to rebel at Löwith's skeptical relativism: Against Schmitt, Voegelin maintains that the management of meaning via decisionism is futile; against Löwith, he claims that they only way out of catastrophe lies in reconnecting religiously or philosophically with the "ground of existence" – the only genuine, non-pathological source of a meaningful order of human affairs

Chapter 3: Embracing Reality – Eric Voegelin's Criticism and Uptake of "Modern Psychology"

1. Introduction

Eric Voegelin occupies an ambiguous position in the German secularization debate. On one hand, his 1938 book *Political Religions* represents, after Schmitt's *Political Theology*, one of the earliest key texts in the debate, and Voegelin's work continued to be concerned with the political implications of secularization and the question of meaning in politics through his mid-century work up to his late publications. At the same time, Voegelin seemed to retreat as much as possible from any actual debate, whether written or verbal. As Thierry Gontier has noted, Voegelin did not mention Schmitt in *Political Religions*, despite the apparent resonance in their subject matter, and despite Voegelin's extensive and largely celebratory assessments of Schmitt in his earlier work.[326] This lack of attention to other key figures in the debate was in some cases mutual. Hans Blumenberg's *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* does not mention Voegelin at all, save for one reference to his work in a footnote.[327] Voegelin is similarly absent from the other landmark reassessment of the German secularization debate: Schmitt's *Political Theology II.* Naturally, unlike Schmitt and Löwith, Voegelin did not

[326] Thierry Gontier, "From 'Political Theology' to 'Political Religion': Eric Voegelin and Carl Schmitt," *The Review of Politics* 75, no. 1 (2013): 25–43, pp. 26–28. In 1931, Voegelin published a review of Schmitt's *Constitutional Theory* and engaged his work at length in both *The Theory of Governance* (1930–32) and *The Authoritarian State* (1936). See: Eric Voegelin, *Selected Book Reviews*, ed. Barry Cooper, trans. Jodi Cockerill and Barry Cooper (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), pp. 42–66; Eric Voegelin, "The Theory of Governance," in *The Theory of Governance and Other Miscellaneous Papers, 1921–1938*, ed. William Petropulos and Gilbert Weiss, trans. Sue Bollans et al. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 224–372, pp. 360–368; Eric Voegelin, *The Authoritarian State: An Essay on the Problem of the Austrian State*, ed. Gilbert Weiss, trans. Ruth Hein (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), Ch. 1

[327] Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, p. 606n.1

respond to Blumenberg's book, either critically or positively, and kept his distance from the fray as a whole.[328]

Of the key figures in the German secularization debate, Voegelin's relationship to Löwith is perhaps the most interesting and ambiguous. Based at least on their correspondence, Voegelin and Löwith had a largely friendly and familiar relationship,[329] and Voegelin made no secret to Löwith of his admiration for 1949's *Meaning in History*, writing that he had "the sinister intention of plundering some of it, and also your bibliographies."[330] It is therefore unsurprising that scholars have long noted that Voegelin's mid-century work is strongly influenced by Löwith's work on the philosophy of history.[331] That said, Voegelin's admiration of Löwith was limited to the latter's diagnosis of the conditions of fascism – like many others, Voegelin criticized the lack of positive possibility in Löwith's writing. Due to some "differences…in our fundamental orientations," Löwith has no sense of "what to do next"[332] – whereas Voegelin perceived his own work as surpassing mere critical analysis and providing a "therapeutic analysis" to overcome the "pneumopathology" of the twentieth century.[333]

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[328] On this, see: Gilbert Weiss, "Between Gnosis and Anamnesis: European Perspectives on Eric Voegelin," *The Review of Politics* 62, no. 4 (2000): 753–76.

[329] At one point, the two even considered writing a book on Nietzsche together. See: Eric Voegelin, *Selected Correspondence, 1924–1949*, ed. Jürgen Gebhardt, trans. William Petropulos (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2009), pp. 414–418

[330] Eric Voegelin, *Selected Correspondence, 1950–1984*, ed. Thomas A. Hollweck, trans. Sandy Adler, Thomas A. Hollweck, and William Petropulos (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), p. 43

[331] Sjoerd Griffioen, *Contesting Modernity in the German Secularization Debate*, pp. 19, 270–278; Joe Paul Kroll, *A Human End to History*, p. 168

[332] Eric Voegelin, *Selected Correspondence, 1950–1984*, p. 43–44; Eric Voegelin, "In Search of the Ground," p. 238

[333] See, e.g., Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, p. 15

This assessment was not at all atypical for Voegelin – he was frequently happy to accept the empirical or phenomenal observations of other scholars while maintaining that his and their core frameworks of analysis were unbridgeably different. In this chapter, I turn to Voegelin's similarly ambiguous uptake of mass psychology as a key influence on his account of totalitarian mass movements and the intellectual and spiritual deficiencies of the twentieth century as a whole. While they have gone largely unappreciated by secondary scholars, Voegelin's engagements with what he called "modern psychology"[334] were frequent and extended from his earliest publications through to the end of his life. As we will see, many of these engagements were quite critical – Voegelin charged modern psychology with reducing the richness of human existence to a series of bio-psychological desires, urges, and drives and with paving the way to totalitarianism. At the same time, however, Voegelin acknowledged that psychology, and especially mass psychology, greatly influenced his own intellectual development, and he adopted and adapted many of the key claims and themes of mass psychology in his own account of mass movements.

Much like his assessment of Löwith, Voegelin acknowledged and even praised the "great empirical investigations" of modern psychology but rejected as deficient its "metaphysical foundations."[335] Voegelin's adaptation of mass psychology therefore involved his reinterpretation of the empirical observations of that field within his own metaphysical framework. In this Chapter, I

[334] For an account of this term, see subsection 1.1 below.

[335] Eric Voegelin, *Religion and the Rise of Modernity*, ed. James L. Wiser (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), p. 152n.39

argue that examining Voegelin's critiques of modern psychology alongside his adaptations of mass psychology is key to understanding Voegelin's answer to the problem of meaning in politics.

This Chapter contributes to scholarship on Voegelin in two key ways. First, it reveals a key but unappreciated influence on Voegelin's philosophical trajectory and mature work, which is crucial to situating him within twentieth-century intellectual history. The evident influence of classical philosophy on Voegelin's vocabulary and theoretical approach has led some to portray him as a participant in the "return to the Greeks" in the aftermath of World War II. While not wholly inaccurate, it is also important to note Voegelin's engagement with mass psychology, which was, in different ways and times, also taken up by the Frankfurt School, the existentialists, and American sociology. Second, it suggests, through the example of "modern psychology," that Voegelin's account of humans as irreducibly meaning-making beings, as well as his account of the locus of and search for that meaning, stands at the root of his myriad criticisms of modern ideologies and intellectual traditions – rather than, as sometimes supposed, a mere reactionary response to the eclipse of religious politics.

Subsection 1.1 addresses Voegelin's shifting terminology over the course of his career and clarifies some of the key terms that he uses in his studies, particularly "gnosticism," "pneumopathology," and "modern psychology." These concepts will be elaborated in subsequent sections, but I briefly address them here as a preliminary matter to set the stage for further analysis. Section 2 examines the various influences that scholars have attributed to Voegelin, suggesting that Voegelin's many criticisms of modern psychology is one reason his debt to mass psychology has gone largely unnoticed. Section 3 examines these criticisms, appearing both in Voegelin's published works

and in his correspondence and emphasizes that Voegelin's criticisms of modern psychology were most often centered on what he perceived as its effacing of the "In-Betweenness" of human existence. Sections 4 and 5 draw primarily on Voegelin's mid-century work (late 1940s to mid-1960s) as well as the mass psychology of both Freud and the late-nineteenth-century French crowd psychologist Gustave Le Bon to argue that despite these criticisms, Voegelin adopted many of the key empirical observations and themes from mass psychology in his own diagnosis of twentieth-century mass movements. The conclusion draws on this analysis to suggest that Voegelin's uptake of mass psychology provided him with an analytic framework of meaning-making centered on the pathological and the normal, which enabled him to see a return to a healthy, stable politics as always a live possibility.

1.1 Note on Terminology

Voegelin's terminology is notoriously slippery. As Michael Franz notes, Voegelin was distressed by the lack of a modern vocabulary to contend with spiritual disorders, which led him to constant terminological experimentation. As a result, while his core claims are fairly consistent, "his use of terms and analogies is often surprisingly indefinite. Concepts announced in one work fail to appear in the next…and terms that arise in differing contexts are often used interchangeably."[336] Indeed, Voegelin's vocabulary tends to shift in line with his own concrete historical-theoretical interests; these interests travelled extensively over the course of his career, from theology to classics to

[336] Michael Franz, *Eric Voegelin and the Politics of Spiritual Revolt: The Roots of Modern Ideology* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), p. 17; Stefan Rossbach similarly notes the consistency in Voegelin's core ideas and philosophical approach, despite his ever-fluid terminology: Stefan Rossbach, "Gnosis in Eric Voegelin's Philosophy," *The Political Science Reviewer* 34 (2005): 77–121, p. 113

social science and beyond, leading to an impossibly capacious theoretical lexicon, which, in many instances, reflects his own unique interpretations of these ideas.[337]

Of all Voegelin's terms, his interpretation of "gnosticism" is perhaps his best known and most controversial – even though, as discussed later, Voegelin was not drawing a genealogical, but rather a phenomenological connection between the historical sect of gnosticism and modern mass movements.. Gnosticism, in Voegelin's use, is an intentionally expansive category, encompassing nearly every modern intellectual tradition and political movement. Franz provides a handy, yet incomplete, list of the modern intellectual and political trends in which Voegelin sees some form of gnosticism, including: anarchism, behavioralism, biologism, constitutionalism, existentialism, fascism, liberalism, marxism, positivism, progressivism, psychologism, and utilitarianism.[338] The expansiveness of Voegelin's gnosticism has strained the patience of even Voegelin's most sympathetic readers, who have frequently charged the concept with reductionism and ambiguity.[339] Indeed, it seems, as Thomas Altizer once quipped, that "Professor Voegelin finds everything to be Gnostic."[340] It is perhaps due to the ambiguity of the term and its seemingly endless capacity to expand that Voegelin, at a 1978 conference, suggested that he would likely avoid the term "gnosticism" were he to begin his work all

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[337] For example, the online Dictionary of Voegelinian Terminology contains entries for over 200 specialized terms – many drawn from theology or classical philosophy, but nearly all with their own Vogelinian twist. See: Jack Elliott, "Dictionary of Voegelinian Terminology," n.d., https://watershade.net/ev/ev-dictionary.html. See also: Jerry Day, *Voegelin, Schelling, and the Philosophy of Historical Existence* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), pp. 33–36.

[338] Michael Franz, *Eric Voegelin and the Politics of Spiritual Revolt*, p. 8

[339] e.g., Eugene Webb, "Voegelin's 'Gnosticism' Reconsidered," *The Political Science Reviewer* 34 (2005): 48–76; Hans Kelsen, *A New Science of Politics: Hans Kelsen's Reply to Eric Voegelin's "New Science of Politics": A Contribution to the Critique of Ideology*, ed. Eckhart Arnold (Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag, 2004), e.g., pp. 76–83.

[340] Altizer said this in a conversation with John Corrington, who recounted it in 1975. See: John W. Corrington, "Order and History: The Breaking of the Program," *The Denver Quarterly* 10, no. 3 (1975): 115–22.

over again.[341] That said, the expansiveness of Voegelin's concept of gnosticism was, for him, reflective of often-overlooked commonalities between apparently competing modern ideologies.

On Voegelin's account, what unifies these disparate "gnostic" movements or intellectual traditions is a particular "pneumopathology" – a disease of the spirit, rather than of the mind (psychopathology). This pneumopathology involves a rejection or non-recognition of the fundamental human condition, which Voegelin interchangeably calls In-Betweenness, *metaxy*, or *metaleptic reality*, the latter two drawn from Plato and Aristotle, respectively.[342] By In-Betweenness, Voegelin in essence claims that all humans intuitively recognize themselves, unique among other forms of life, as existing between transcendent and immanent "poles" of reality. In other words, we understand ourselves to be qualitatively distinct from the material and biological reality of this world and as able to experience ourselves, even if to a limited extent, as taking part in something that transcends this world. This In-Betweenness is, for Voegelin, crucial to the comprehension of the "fullness" of human nature: Existing in tension between immanence and transcendence, individuals are driven to search for the "ground" of existence: that which illuminates life by providing an ultimate end or purpose and therefore an ultimate meaning of human existence, which Voegelin believes can only properly be sought in experiences of transcendence.

What Voegelin calls "pneumopathology" involves rejecting the transcendent pole of existence and considering human beings to exist only in the mundane world and be explainable and

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[341] Eugene Webb, *Eric Voegelin: Philosopher of History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981), pp. 199–200

[342] See: Eric Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, ed. Michael Franz (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), pp. 50, 87

interpretable only on this basis of "world-immanent" categories. "Gnostic" movements are the intellectual and political manifestations of this pneumopathological mode of thought. For Voegelin, these gnostic movements share a common and exclusive orientation towards the mundane pole of reality and claim that politics, society, and individuals are all understandable via categories of material self-interest, bio-psychological passions or drives, or other this-worldly motivations. In contrast, Voegelin's notion of In-Betweenness suggests that humans are fundamentally meaning-making creatures who are driven not merely by immanent forces, but also by some apprehension of order and meaning existing outside of mundane life.

"Modern psychology" (Voegelin himself often places the term in quotation marks) is one such pneumopathological and gnostic mode of thought. Voegelin defines this term by way of comparison: Augustinian psychology (for example) was attuned to the In-Betweenness of human existence and therefore distinguished between "*amor sui* and *amor dei* as the organizational volitional centers of the soul." Its terms (*concupiscentia*, *superbia*, etc.) recognized that human nature and behavior is not comprehensible solely through mundane forces, but also via the metaphysical wound of original sin, which inclines humanity towards immorality. In contrast, modern psychology assumes a wholly mundane model of humanity – it reduces the transcendently oriented notion of *concupiscentia* (for example) to "biological urges" of a "materialistically conceived libido in need of sublimation." Voegelin traces the origins of modern psychology to Hobbes, who "threw out the *amor Dei* and relied

for his psychology on the *amor sui,*" and considers the term to encompass both mass psychology and psychoanalysis (with the latter being perhaps its most prominent twentieth-century manifestation).[343]

Of course, in developing his term "pneumopathology," Voegelin already adapts the language of modern psychology. Indeed, Voegelin himself explicitly related pneumopathology and psychopathology, distinguishing the former as a more complete and accurate category: "The essence of gnostic politics must be interpreted as a spiritual sickness, as a *nosos* in Plato's and Schelling's sense of the term: a disturbance in the life of the spirit as distinct from mental illness in the sense of a psychopathology."[344] That said, Voegelin's relation with modern psychology goes far beyond terminological borrowings: It begins with the earliest years of his education and continues, in varying registers, into some of his last publications.

2. Voegelin's Influences

Voegelin is a notoriously dense and slippery writer,[345] which has led readers to see in his work a variety of concrete leanings. Thomas Heilke notes that Voegelin has "been branded with nearly every ideological label available: fascist and communist, liberal and conservative, existentialist and fideist, socialist and reactionary, Jew, Catholic, and Protestant."[346] Among these, the ascription of

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[343] Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, pp. 184–186; Eric Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, pp. 257–258

[344] Eric Voegelin, "Gnostic Politics," in *Published Essays: 1940–1952*, ed. Ellis Sandoz, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 223–40, p. 226; See also: Eric Voegelin, *The New Order and Last Orientation* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), pp. 151–152

[345] The difficulty of Voegelin's work is frequently invoked in secondary literature. Ted McAllister, in a somewhat backhanded compliment, quipped: "If philosophers were judged on the incomprehensibility of their work, Voegelin could be compared with the likes of Hegel." See: Ted V. McAllister, *Revolt Against Modernity: Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, and the Search for a PostLiberal Order* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996), p. 17

[346] Thomas W. Heilke, *Eric Voegelin: In Quest of Reality* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), pp. 1–25

conservatism to Voegelin's work is by far the most common, in part due to his skepticism towards universalist political claims and progress narratives, as well as his apparent openness to a modern politics grounded in a shared substantive religion. Bjørn Thomassen notes that while "Voegelin tried everything he could to stay aloft from political ideologies...his approach was widely perceived as conservative, and has most often been appropriated by thinkers of the political right."[347] Louis Dupré has tried to recognize the ambiguity of Voegelin's politics, describing him rather paradoxically as a "conservative anarchist,"[348] while others claim that any attempt to adequately label Voegelin's politics is doomed to failure and have pointed to this as a reason for the (in their eyes) insufficient attention paid to him within academia.[349] Voegelin's philosophical identity is similarly ambiguous; as Eugene Webb puts it: "He does not present a system of ideas that could be labeled according to any of the traditional designations–such as 'materialist,' 'idealist,' 'empiricist,' 'realist,' and so on."[350]

One reason for this political and philosophical indeterminacy lies in Voegelin's broad and eclectic set of influences, ranging from Ancient Greek philosophy through early Christian theology, scholasticism, German Idealism, and contemporary movements such as existentialism and phenomenology. Indeed, as Webb notes, Voegelin's writing evinces (and demands) "a familiarity with

[347] Bjørn Thomassen, "Gregory Bateson and Eric Voegelin: Silent Dialogues Across the Human Sciences," *History of the Human Sciences* 30, no. 3 (2017): 86–106, p. 87; Ted McAllister has elaborated on this uptake, showing that, while Voegelin expressed annoyance at being characterized as a conservative, Cold War conservatism and eventually neo-conservatism frequently "drafted" him (along with Strauss) into the "conservative orbit." See: Ted V. McAllister, *Revolt Against Modernity,* pp. 9–13.

[348] Louis Dupré, "A Conservative Anarchist: Eric Voegelin 1901–1985," *Clio* 14, no. 4 (1985): 423–31

[349] Michael P. Federici, *Eric Voegelin: The Restoration of Order* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2002), pp. xxi–xxv

[350] Eugene Webb, *Eric Voegelin*, p. 5

the entire history of Western thought – mythological, philosophical, and religious."[351] This syncretic approach has led many scholars to attempt to disentangle Voegelin's various influences and trace their impact on his work.

Given that much of Voegelin's (ever-shifting) terminology is derived from his readings of classical philosophy, and given his persistent interest in Christian theology, many have pointed to the Greek and Christian traditions as *the* key influences on Voegelin's philosophy. Thomassen has in multiple publications traced Voegelin's influences to figures in Ancient Greek philosophy and early Christianity – while both Voegelin's "vocabulary" and his "theoretical view" were primarily "derived from his reliance on the classical tradition," he also freely drew "ideals or values" from figures like Augustine, in whom he saw a similar orientation towards the divine ground of order.[352] Sandoz arrives at a similar conclusion, albeit with some shifting of key figures, arguing that Voegelin's "paradigm of philosophizing" was largely derived from Plato and Aristotle on one hand, and scholastic theology via Anselm on the other.[353] Michael Franz and James Wiser each privilege the Ancient Greek influence over the Christian, effectively framing Voegelin in line with figures like Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss as a participant in the post-war return to the classical tradition.[354]

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[351] Ibid., p. 3

[352] Bjørn Thomassen, "Gregory Bateson and Eric Voegelin," p. 95; Bjørn Thomassen, "Modernity as a Spiritual Disorder: Searching for a Vocabulary of Social Pathologies in the Work of Eric Voegelin," in *The Social Pathologies of Contemporary Civilization*, ed. Kieran Keohane and Anders Petersen (Burlington: Ashgate, 2013), 43–62.

[353] Ellis Sandoz, "The Philosopher's Vocation: The Voegelinian Paradigm," *The Review of Politics* 71 (2009): 54–67.

[354] James L. Wiser, "Eric Voegelin: A Study in the Renewal of Political Science," *Polity* 18, no. 2 (1985): 295–312; Michael Franz, *Eric Voegelin and the Politics of Spiritual Revolt*, p. 44

Others have emphasized the importance of more recent influences. Gontier claims that Voegelin's concept of political religions and its subsequent development into pneumopathology drew not only on Louis Rougier's *mystiques politiques*, which Voegelin acknowledges as an influence, but also on "French Catholic 'personalist' philosophers, such as Jacques Maritain, Henri de Lubac, and Joseph Vialatoux, who also interpreted the emerging totalitarian movements" in terms of a "profound spiritual disorder."[355] William Petropulos emphasizes the contributions of phenomenology, especially Max Scheler, to Voegelin's formative early work, especially *Political Religions*,[356] while Arpad Szakolczai traces how the neo-Kantianism that saturated Voegelin's Viennese academic context (including the neo-Kantianism of his doctoral advisor Hans Kelsen) influenced his later thought.[357] Alessandra Gerolin points instead to Voegelin's uptake of Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy as a key shaper of his work,[358] and Jerry Day, in perhaps the most thorough investigation of Voegelin's intellectual debts to date, emphasizes the importance of F.W.J. Schelling as one of Voegelin's key influences, arguing that "Voegelin's lifework is best understood as an attempt to become *the* philosopher of the 'Schelling Renaissance.'"[359]

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[355] Thierry Gontier, "From 'Political Theology' to 'Political Religion," pp. 25–26

[356] William Petropulos, "The Person as *Imago Dei:* Augustine and Max Scheler in Eric Voegelin's *Herrschaftslehre* and *Political Religions*," in *The Politics of the Soul: Eric Voegelin on Religious Experience*, ed. Glenn Hughes (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 87–114.

[357] Arpad Szakolczai, "Eric Voegelin and Neo-Kantianism: Early Formative Experience or Late Entrapment," in *Eric Voegelin and the Continental Tradition: Explorations in Modern Political Thought*, ed. Lee Trepanier and Steven F. McGuire (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2011), 137–165.

[358] Alessandra Gerolin, "The Influence of Alfred North Whitehead on Eric Voegelin," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 76, no. 4 (2015): 633–55.

[359] Jerry Day, *Voegelin, Schelling, and the Philosophy of Historical Existence*, p. 10

In considering this sweeping retinue of influences, however, one tradition is conspicuously absent: mass psychology. In some ways, this omission makes sense. Voegelin, particularly in his mature work, made little secret of his distaste for "modern psychology," lambasting its reduction of the human to a set of unconscious drives and motivations, its conflation of pathology and normalcy, and its capacity to be leveraged for the purposes of political manipulation. While readers of Voegelin have noted the strong presence of psychoanalysis during his early years at the University of Vienna and suggested that it must have made some impression on the young scholar,[360] this is typically dismissed as not being a formative influence on his work. Indeed, none of the ten essays in a recent volume dedicated to *Eric Voegelin and the Continental Tradition* addresses Voegelin's relationship to psychoanalysis or psychoanalytically inflected mass psychology.[361] In those rare and typically terse moments when the secondary literature does engage Voegelin's relation to psychology, it tends to comment only on Voegelin's critiques thereof.[362] Indeed, it is likely Voegelin's capacious criticism of modern psychology that has led interpreters to downplay his more productive engagements with these writings, or else dismiss them as a short-lived, juvenile fascination. However, attending to these criticisms alongside Voegelin's thematic and empirical borrowings from mass psychology reveals more fully his attitude towards the field, as well as his response to the problem of meaning in politics.

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[360] As Louis Dupré puts it, "none of the crosscurrents that swept through [Vienna] left the young student untouched," with Freud, Adler, Weber, von Mises, Husserl, Rilke, Einstein, and others being either present or contributing in their work to the eclectic intellectual mood of the University. See: Louis Dupré, "A Conservative Anarchist," p. 423

[361] Lee Trepanier and Steven F. McGuire, eds., *Eric Voegelin and the Continental Tradition: Explorations in Modern Political Thought* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2011), 137–65.

[362] See, for example: Ellis Sandoz, *The Voegelinian Revolution*, p. 112

3. Voegelin and "Modern Psychology"

Voegelin in his memoirs wrote of the "massive influence…[of] the psychologists" while working towards his doctorate at the University of Vienna from 1919 to 1921, above all the "presence of Freud."[363] Importantly, Freud himself was, during Voegelin's time in Vienna, in the process of writing *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, his key text on mass psychology, eventually to be published the same year Voegelin finished his studies. The influence of psychoanalysis on Voegelin was present even before his doctoral studies, however. In recollecting his experience in his *Realgymnasium*, he singles out one teacher "who was especially interested in psychoanalysis" as a particularly strong influence on his education.[364]

Voegelin's first published book, *On the Form of the American Mind* (1928), demonstrates his keen interest at the time in collective national psychology, and he two years later attempted to generalize his method developed in this book into a broader procedure for classifying and investigating national "mental types."[365] While these texts demonstrate Voegelin's early interest in and use of group psychology, his development of a "spiritually oriented race theory," against a purely biological-

[363] Eric Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2011), p. 32

[364] Ibid., p. 37

[365] Eric Voegelin, *On the Form of the American Mind*, ed. Jürgen Gebhardt and Barry Cooper, trans. Ruth Hein (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995); Eric Voegelin, "National Types of Mind and the Limits to Interstate Relations," in *The Theory of Governance and Other Miscellaneous Papers, 1921–1938*, ed. William Petropulos and Gilbert Weiss (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 430–82. On Voegelin's early national psychology and its relation to his ambiguous nationalism, see: Pedro T. Magalhães, "Promise and Failure: Nationalism in the Interwar Thought of Carl Schmitt and Eric Voegelin," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 27, no. 1 (2022): 11–30.

materialist or psychological racism, presaged his later adaptation of psychological categories in line with his fundamental orientation to the transcendent pole of human existence.[366]

Indeed, national-level mass psychology was very much on Voegelin's mind around this time, primarily in relation to his time spent in and his own study of the United States. In a 1928 review of recent publications concerned with the U.S., he singled out two monographs for praise as they contained "a wealth of material" on the particular qualities of "American group psychology."[367] Shortly after, he similarly praised the German sociologist Charlotte Lütkens for her thorough analysis of American "frontier psychology."[368] Conversely, at different points in the 1930s, he chastised scholars for failing to attend to the discoveries and "theoretical underpinning" of mass psychology in the vein of Gustave Le Bon.[369]

Voegelin's avowed interest in mass psychology continued through his flight from Germany in 1938. Prior to this point, Voegelin had taught courses in social psychology; upon his search for a professorship in the United States, he listed it as one of his areas of expertise in numerous letters to colleagues and administrators and occasionally emphasized that "I have...gone deeply into the questions of mass-psychology."[370] Voegelin also expressed a continued interest in mass psychology in

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[366] On Voegelin's spiritual race thinking during this early period, see: Wulf D. Hund, "The Racism of Eric Voegelin," *Journal of World Philosophies* 4 (2019): 1–22

[367] Eric Voegelin, *Selected Book Reviews*, pp. 21–22. The books in question were Eugene Lyons' *The Life and Death of Sacco and Vanzetti*, which was translated into German the year after its English-language publication, and *Schreckensherrschaft in Amerika* by the Silesian anarchist Augustin Souchy.

[368] Ibid., p. 33

[369] Ibid., pp. 108, 119. Voegelin elaborated on this in a letter to Eduard Baumgarten, the author of one of the monographs Voegelin reviewed. See: Eric Voegelin, *Selected Correspondence, 1924–1949*, pp. 140–141

[370] e.g., see: Eric Voegelin, *Selected Correspondence, 1924–1949*, pp. 144, 146, 148, 164, 199, 200

his correspondence around this time. In 1945, he wrote to the novelist Hermann Broch that he was "looking forward with great expectations to your mass-psychology" and followed up two years later in 1947 for a further inquiry about "your large work…about which I only know that it has something to do with the 'psychology of the masses.'"[371]

While Voegelin's attitude towards modern psychology quickly turned more critical, he could never bring himself to fully jettison the field and its key figures. Indeed, Voegelin seems to have retained some hope that psychoanalysis, for all its flaws, could one day be repurposed and reframed as a "philosophically founded science" on firm metaphysical grounding. If one overcomes the "hypostases of psychoanalysis," he suggested in 1969, then perhaps "the great empirical investigations of psychoanalysis would be shown to be a valuable continuation of classic and Christian studies on the psychology of human beings, their passions, the control of passions and the types of personality."[372] That said, the hypothetical future redemption of psychology did not prevent Voeglein from venting his frustrations with the field in both published writings and personal correspondence. By 1940, Voegelin was already characterizing psychology as an intellectual fad – the "latest fashion of science" with an analytical focus on "the satisfaction of certain psychological needs."[373]

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[371] Eric Voegelin, *Selected Correspondence, 1924–1949*, p. 427, 542. Broch's *Massenwahntheorie* would remain unfinished at the time of his death, but extant fragments have since been published in Volume 12 of his collected works.

[372] Eric Voegelin, *Selected Correspondence, 1950–1984*, pp. 611–612; Voegelin in an earlier letter made similar comments about Jung specifically: "there is more in his psychology (I believe) than he himself realizes. Jung is badly handicapped by his inability to theoretically process his material; I believe he is philosophically too uneducated, or perhaps simply theoretically ungifted." See: Eric Voegelin*, Selected Correspondence, 1924–1949,* p. 497

[373] Eric Voegelin, "The Growth of the Race Idea," *The Review of Politics* 2 (1940): 283–317, p. 314

Voegelin's general antipathy towards modern psychology only grew in subsequent decades – an attitude that is reflected in his eagerness to portray specific works on the field as incontrovertible refutations. In a 1965 lecture titled "In Search of the Ground," he praises *Freud*: *The Mind of the Moralist* by the American sociologist Philip Rieff as having all but eliminated the standing of its subject:"If you read that book on Freud and psychoanalysis you know psychoanalysis is finished. After that book nobody can be a psychoanalyst with a decent conscience."[374] In the discussion following his lecture, he made an almost identical statement about Carl Jung and the religious scholar Robert Charles Zaehner: "If you want information [on Jung], read the book on mysticism by Zaehner of Oxford. There you find the whole problem explained and also a very interesting criticism of Jung's psychology. Jung is finished after Zaehner."[375]

Beyond this type of dismissive comment, Voegelin's core issues with modern psychology involve its rejection of the In-Betweenness of human existence in two senses. First, for Voegelin, modern psychology replaces the existential condition of human experience, as existing between transcendent and immanent poles, with a purely immanent conception of the psyche. This makes psychology perhaps the prime obscurant of the intermediate position of humans between the pole of transcendence and immanence through what he calls its "phenomenalism" – the "preoccupation…with the phenomenal aspects of the world, as they appear in science," and the concomitant substitution of the study of phenomena for the study of substance.[376]

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[374] Eric Voegelin, "In Search of the Ground," p. 237

[375] Ibid., p. 248

[376] Eric Voegelin, *The New Order and Last Orientation*, pp. 178–182

In economic phenomenalism, for example, a set of assumptions (e.g., the rationally self-interested *homo economicus*, the socially optimal coordination of self-interested behavior, etc.) is overlaid onto the world and taken as a substantial "right order of society" complete with "standards of action" – effacing meaningful questions of substance concerning "whether there are not a few things more important for man and his life in society than a maximum equipment with goods." Within modern psychological phenomenalism, including psychoanalytic "depth psychology," the substantial "life of the spirit" becomes reduced to "a manifold of manageable causal relations," leading to the rise of the "psychological manager:" of "adjustment; conditioning; education, and reeducation; of propaganda and counterpropaganda." Resonating with contemporary critiques of instrumental rationality, Voegelin claims that the instruments and procedures of phenomenalism, psychological, economic, and otherwise, become detached from "substantial purposes and gain a momentum of their own that bends the purposes to the technical possibilities" – with the Nazi genocides being "the starkest manifestation of the victory of phenomenal obsession over spiritual order."[377]

These forgotten substantial issues are related to the fundamental aspect of human existence: "In-Betweenness" – the experience of existing in tension with both divine and human reality. It is this "In-Between structure of existence" that phenomenal analysis effaces, including modern psychology with its "phantasy of a world-immanent psyche":

> The treatment of the concupiscences as biological urges, the construction of a materialistically conceived libido that is in need of sublimation, of a doctrinaire ego and superego that have to eclipse the tensions of existence…[and] a collective unconscious loaded with 'archetypes' that once upon a time…were the conscious symbolizations of metaleptic reality – these are some of the items from the long list of imaginative

[377] Ibid., pp. 185–192

> constructions that serve the common purpose of making the In-Between structure of existence unrecognizable.[378]

Furthermore, the efficacy of strategies of psychological manipulation – a recurrent theme in Voegelin's work[379] – reflects a second charge Voegelin levies against modern psychology: Specifically, not only does this field obscure the In-Betweenness of human life, but it also is itself fed by this obscured image of reality and thus is unable to properly distinguish between the pathological and the normal. According to Voegelin, a pneumopathological orientation can "eclipse but not abolish reality," with the experience of transcendence constantly threatening to "emerge into consciousness." In reaction, the gnostic individual attempts to relegate this threatening reality to a status of "non-reality." This can occur directly, with the experience of transcendence "consciously denied the status of reality, as in the dogma of no-God," but it can also occur through psychological immanence: "a reality to be eclipsed can be relegated to the limbo of oblivion that we call the unconscious." In either case, those who "suffer from the compulsion to deform their humanity" by denying the experience of transcendence remain tacitly aware of this deformation, which leads to introspection, confession, and "self-analysis." Indeed, Voegelin writes, "Self-analysis is so much the accompaniment of imaginative projections that the age of [gnosticism] has become the great age of Psychology."[380]

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[378] Eric Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, p. 257

[379] e.g., Eric Voegelin, *The Authoritarian State*, p. 105; Eric Voegelin, *The New Order and Last Orientation*, pp. 135–136

[380] Eric Voegelin, "The Eclipse of Reality," in *Phenomenology and Social Reality: Essays in Memory of Alfred Schutz*, trans. Maurice Natanson (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970), 185–94, pp. 187–188

But what is the subject of modern psychology at which this (self-)analysis aims? Voegelin's answer is that this subject is the "normal" type of the "'modern' man, that is...the man who was intellectually and spiritually disoriented and hence motivated primarily by his passions" – as opposed to the "healthy psyche, in the Platonic sense," which remains open to and oriented towards the experience of transcendence. Modern psychology is therefore "an incomplete psychology" because it addresses itself only to immanent motivations based in *amor sui* – consequently, it applies only to "a certain pneumopathological type of man" who remains closed to transcendence. But given the "empirical frequency" of this pneumopathology, this spiritual disorientation was interpreted not only as psychologically "normal," but also, within philosophical anthropology, as essential human nature.[381]

In other words, modern psychology addresses itself to the typical mind of its era, becoming an "empirical science of the spiritually disoriented, merely motivated, human being."[382] The "great empirical investigations of psychoanalysis" are therefore not wholly invalid, but rather constitute genuine observations of the modern psyche – albeit mistaking the healthy openness to the ground as pathological and mistaking the pathological closure to transcendence as healthy. While, as Voegelin notes elsewhere, a detachment from the divine ground "was diagnosed by the Stoics as a disease of the mind" and was considered as such "well into the Renaissance,"[383] in the twentieth century, those

[381] Eric Voegelin, *New Science of Politics*, pp. 66–70, 184–186

[382] Eric Voegelin, *Selected Correspondence, 1924–1949*, p. 661

[383] Eric Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, p. 125

moderns most stricken by pathological thinking "claim for their mental disease the status of mental health."[384]

3.1 Pathologization of Religion

Particular religions and religious beliefs have themselves, particularly in their more experiential and ecstatic forms, long been subject to accusations of mental or spiritual disease[385] – a trend that only accelerated in the twentieth century with the pathologization of religious belief via psychoanalysis. In 1927, as Voegelin was perhaps at the peak of his interest in mass psychology, being in the midst of writing his book on the American mind, Freud published *The Future of an Illusion* – neither his first nor last word on religion, but perhaps his most pointed. In this text, Freud argues that the stability of civilization requires both material benefits and "mental assets" – i.e. "measures of coercion and other measures that are intended to reconcile men to it and to recompense them for their sacrifices," so as to constrain universal human "destructive, and therefore anti-social and anti-culture, trends." Religion constitutes "perhaps the most important" of these, providing consolation in the face of the capricious "terrors" of fate and nature.[386]

The helplessness of adults against nature mirrors the helplessness of the child in relation to their parents, who were feared but also provided protection against external dangers. Following this

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[384] Eric Voegelin, "Reason: The Classic Experience," *The Southern Review* 10, no. 2 (1974): 237–64, p. 251

[385] For example, see: Reinhart Koselleck, "Modernity and the Planes of Historicity," in *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2004), 3–20, pp. 3–12; June McDaniel, *Lost Ecstasy: Its Decline and Transformation in Religion* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), Chs. 2–3, particularly pp. 59–62, 64–66; Sean McCloud, *Divine Hierarchies: Class in American Religion and Religious Studies* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), p. 35

[386] Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton & Company, 1961), pp. 7, 11, 15–17

"infantile prototype," the adult then gives "the forces of nature…the character of a father. He makes them into gods." As the physical regularities of nature became better understood, its forces were divested of godhead, but "man's helplessness remained and along with it his longing for his father." All religions are therefore "illusions, fulfilments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind," and are phylogenetically analogous to "infantile neuroses." While these wish-fulfilling illusions need not be straightforwardly false, many religions are "so incompatible with everything we have laboriously discovered about the reality of the world" that they qualify as "delusions."[387]

For Voegelin, religious experience is an (but, as we will see, not the only) experience of transcendence – one that recognizes the all-important In-Betweenness of human existence. Therefore, Voegelin at multiple points criticizes psychology specifically because it reduces the religious experience and exploration of the metaleptic reality of human life to a series of "projections:" Anthropomorphism and "theomorphism" each deny and deform the In-Betweenness of human life by placing undue priority on one of the poles of transcendence or immanence in order to use it "as the basis for clever psychologizing."[388] Similarly, in a 1965 lecture, Voegelin again dismissed psychoanalysis as misconstruing religion as an immanent phenomenon explainable not through "openness toward the ground but by various urges ultimately summarized in the Freudian term *libido*."[389] Indeed, given that

[387] Ibid., pp. 17–19, 30–44

[388] Eric Voegelin*, In Search of Order*, pp. 34–35. See also Voegelin's interpretation of visions in Plato: "The *opsis*, the vision, is Plato's technical term for the experiential process in which the order of reality is seen, becomes reflectively known, and finds its appropriate language symbols…The 'vision' is not somebody's fancy but the imaginative power of response to the reality seen…The passage sounds as if Plato had anticipated the possibility of garbling the meaning of 'vision' by a modern 'projection psychology.'" See: Eric Voegelin, "The Beginning and the Beyond," in *What Is History? And Other Late Unpublished Writings*, ed. Thomas A. Hollweck and Paul Caringella (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990), 173–232, p. 229

[389] Eric Voegelin, "In Search of the Ground," p. 235

psychology denies metaleptic reality, it must interpret the experience of transcendence and faith in revelation "psychologically (maybe even psychopathologically). Such a psychologization seems possible to me only under the condition that not only is the content of revelation psychologized, but also its presumed source, namely God, is denied. And that leads to metaphysical complications."[390]

The reduction of human existence to immanence and the consequent denial of the transcendent pole of reality is not inescapable. Of Hegel's place in the "perversion of immanence," Voegelin writes: "A thinker of his spiritual sensitivity cannot fall into such obvious traps as atheism, materialism, or a psychology of religion. The experience of transcendence is a reality after all."[391] However, modern psychology lacks the "spiritual sensitivity" of Hegel. Dismissing the In-Betweenness of human existence, it instead pathologizes the experience of metaxy that is itself constitutive of a healthy psyche. Voegelin expresses this point by taking Freud's comments on religion in *Future of an Illusion* as a stand-in for any engagement with the transcendent pole of existence: "Freud diagnoses the openness toward the ground as an 'illusion,' a 'neurotic relict,' and an 'infantilism.'"[392]

In short, then, Voegelin criticized modern psychology on a number of grounds: Through its conception of an immanent psyche, it reduces the transcendently oriented human to brute biological and psychological reality; due to its phenomenalism, it lacks the standpoint to properly distinguish

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[390] Eric Voegelin, *Selected Correspondence, 1950–1984,* p. 76. This particular letter was sent to Leo Strauss, with whom Voegelin carried on a sometimes-awkward epistolary relationship. On this, see: Ellis Sandoz, *Republicanism, Religion, and the Soul of America* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006). Ch. 6

[391] Eric Voegelin, "Anxiety and Reason," in *What Is History? And Other Late Unpublished Writings*, ed. Thomas A. Hollweck and Paul Caringella (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990), 52–110, pp. 81–83. On Voegelin's view, Hegel was for a time able to maintain the tension between immanence and transcendence in his "ontology of consciousness that maintains itself in an Archimedic suspension," but that ultimately, he jettisoned the "uncertainty of the ground" for the "certainty of [the] system."

[392] Eric Voegelin, "Reason: The Classic Experience," p. 250

between pathology and normalcy; and, as a consequence of each of these, it mischaracterizes a healthy openness to the transcendent ground of existence as a pathological abnormality. Each of these criticisms returns to Voegelin's core claim about human existence: its In-Betweenness. In the next two sections, I provide a more detailed account of Voegelin's notion of In-Betweenness and its eclipse through "pneumopathological" orientations and "gnostic" political and intellectual projects.

4. Voegelin, Gnosticism, Pneumopathology

Voegelin entered the German secularization debate in earnest with his 1938 book *Political Religions*. In this text, an initial foray into contending with the rise of fascism, Voegelin traces what he sees as the secularization of the Christian *corpus mysticum* as a symbol of political community into the Hobbesian leviathan and beyond – the original Christian ecclesia is "open" in that it holds a *realissimum,* a "most real," "sacred center," beyond itself. The secularization of this symbol is simultaneously its "closure," whereby the realissimum comes to be located within the community itself – in this way, immanent, this-worldly concepts like "nation" or "race" come to be the defining sacred substance of totalitarian movements.[393]

While this text reflects themes and ideas that would continue to interest Voegelin throughout his career – for example, the openness to a divine or transcendent source of order, the symbolic representation of community, etc. – he ultimately expressed dissatisfaction with it. Nearly two decades later, after having fled Nazi Germany and firmly established himself in American academia, Voegelin would look back on the context in which he wrote *Political Religions.* He describes an intellectual

[393] Eric Voegelin, "Political Religions," pp. 44–45, 53–67

atmosphere struck by the mass movements of the 1930s but lacking a vocabulary and framework with which to understand them. This gave rise to "a number of stopgap solutions," including ideas like "neopagan religions" and Louis Rougier's "*mystiques politiques*" – and, of course, "I, too, tried one of these ad hoc explanations in a little book on 'political religions.'"[394] By the 1950s, however, Voegelin expressed greater confidence in his new framework, one which maintained his distinction between an other-worldly and this-worldly "sacred center," but which drew more robustly from mass psychology.

Key to this new perspective is Voegelin's account of the inescapable existential and phenomenological condition of humanity: what he calls "In-Betweenness." This term reflects the human experience of existing between purely immanent and purely transcendent poles of reality – the human is not purely a material creature, but nor is it purely spiritual. Instead, it exists in a constant (and constantly experienced) state of tension between the two – creating a restless "questioning" or "searching" as to the relation between the transcendent and the immanent and what the experience of the former implies about the proper political or social order of the latter.

Importantly, Voegelin does not claim that this kind of searching can ever result in, for example, a governmental-institutional structure that aligns perfectly with the transcendent order of reality and thus may claim legitimacy in perpetuity. Indeed, as Webb notes, Voegelin rejected (and often characterized as "gnostic") the idea that "one can have a direct vision of transcendent reality and thereby derive irreformable knowledge about the true and the good."[395] In other words, the

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[394] Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, p. 4

[395] Eugene Webb, *Philosophers of Consciousness: Polanyi, Lonergan, Voegelin, Ricoeur, Girard, Kierkegaard* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988), pp. 102, 121

questioning that emerges from an openness to the ground should not "push us toward conclusive answers," but rather emphasize that "being human means to search for the meaning of being human."[396] Voegelin's notion of searching was therefore not oriented towards solutions, but rather towards the proper direction of the questioning itself: an attempt to contend with humans not as merely material objects, but also as spiritual beings and as such capable of experiencing the transcendent pole of reality. At points, Voegelin refers to such an experience, and the search for meaning that it implies, as a quest for the ground of existence.

But what does it mean to experience the In-Betweenness of human life – to experience the transcendent pole of reality and seek in this both the ground of existence and the basis of political order? Voegelin frames the answer to this around the question of ultimate purposes. Within mundane life, each end can subsequently be a means to something else. In order to understand the purpose of our actions, then, we must posit an ultimate end, a "*summum bonum*" towards which all mundane means and ends are directed. This ultimate end, the ground of existence, Voegelin claims, can only properly be found in a "fulfillment beyond life" rather than in the mundane sphere, because as humans, we experience "our own existence as not existing out of itself, but as coming from somewhere even if we don't know from where." In other words, the human, per Voegelin, intuitively understands that there must be something more to existence than the material or biological reality that defines non-

[396] Glenn Hughes, *Mystery and Myth in the Philosophy of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993), pp. 107–108

human life and the inorganic world. The meaning of human existence, the final end, must therefore be located beyond this biological and material reality.[397]

However, because this transcendent pole of reality can be experienced but never fully comprehended, the search for this ultimate end is a process of perpetual questioning in which "one keeps open one's human condition and is not tempted to find cheap answers."[398] At the same time, Voegelin says, an awareness of this transcendent ground and the consequent search for meaning generates a series of "symbols" that represent both the experience of this searching and the proper internal order of the individual who is engaged in this search.

For the Greeks, Voegelin's preferred example of such a search for the ground, the most important symbol was "Reason" or "Nous" – which he interprets as the specifically human capacity to experience and stand in tension with transcendence. This Reason consists in the direction of the questioning spurred by In-Betweenness towards "the divine order in the cosmos" – the noetic symbols created in this embrace of In-Betweenness (e.g., "wondering–*thaumazein;* seeking, searching–*zetein*; search–*zetesis*; questioning–*aporein, diaporein,"* and above all, "the 'philosopher'") are thus existentially and experientially true accounts of "the structure in the psyche of a man who is attuned to the divine order in the cosmos." Fundamentally, therefore, Reason is an "openness to reality," and its symbols, ideas, and vocabularies reflect the experience of possessing this openness within a state of In-Betweenness.[399]

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[397] Eric Voegelin, "In Search of the Ground," pp. 225–229

[398] Ibid., p. 225

[399] Eric Voegelin, "Reason: The Classic Experience," pp. 239–241

For Voegelin, these symbols that represent the search for ultimate meaning are not idle philosophical speculations, but rather constitutive of the substance of political community. Political fellow-feeling, in its proper form, requires a recognition of commonality that goes beyond phenomenal or mundane reality: "there is no particular reason…to love other men unless they also participate in the same divine *Nous* and have such a noetic self." The "*philia politike*" produced by this recognition of a common connection to the divine creates community because "only if the community is based on that love in the noetic self will it have order." A stable and well-ordered politics therefore requires "*homonoia*, a common *nous*" that designates a kind of "like-mindedness" or "consciousness of kind." In other words, for Voegelin, political community requires a common understanding of the well-ordered individual (i.e. one open to the ground and seeking meaning beyond this world): The "quest of the ground" therefore "is at the basis of all our thinking with regard to politics" because it "creates a community substance of the *homonoia*." These common understandings are, however, dependent on cultural and historical context – there is no atemporal "correct" set of symbols and thus no single correct way of grounding political community.[400]

Because the experience of In-Betweenness can never result in definite answers, the possible legitimate (i.e. non-pneumopathological) modes of thought and conceptions of order are always plural – a principle that Voegelin made explicit in his unfinished study *Order and History*. While initially conceiving the project as an account of the "increasingly differentiated insight into the order of being," Voegelin by Volume 4 realized the impossibility of arranging the various meaningful experiences and

[400] Eric Voegelin, "In Search of the Ground," pp. 230–232

articulations of order such that history could be "conceived as a 'course.'" Instead, he acknowledged a "plurality of centers of meaning" and disconnected "spiritual outbursts" – while these do "constitute structures of meaning in history, [they] do not themselves fall readily into a pattern that could be understood as meaningful." Despite their resistance to being arranged in a meaningful pattern, these spiritual outbursts are joined in how they each "engender a knowledge of man's existence in the divine-human In-Between" and are all "experienced as meaningful inasmuch as they...[point] toward a fulfillment, toward an Eschaton, out of time."[401]

At the same time, however, because the search for the divine ground never results in definite answers, it creates a profound uncertainty with respect to the meaning of life – the ultimate purpose and end of human existence and action. There will thus always be a temptation to find solace and certainty in "cheap answers" – in other words, to "immanentize" the ground and locate it "somewhere in an immanent hierarchy of being." In such cases, the individual becomes "closed" to transcendence and instead posits some aspect of mundane reality as the highest good and foundational substrate of existence – for example, pleasure (for the utilitarians), "productive relations" (for Marx), or race (for the fascists).[402] Because the experience of In-Betweenness is an irreducible part of the human condition, this closedness to transcendence cannot eliminate the "questioning unrest" that stems from In-Betweenness – but it does change its form. The unrest of the transcendently open questioning is distinctly "joyful:" it is a "theophanic" event in which the "Nous reveals itself as the divine ordering

[401] Eric Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, pp. 45–51

[402] Eric Voegelin, "In Search of the Ground," pp. 234–236

force in the psyche of the questioner and the cosmos at large." But because, for Voegelin, the pull of transcendence can only be ignored but not eliminated, the unrest of transcendently closed questioning is one of anxiety and a feeling of "hostile alienation from a reality that rather hides than reveals itself."[403] This closedness towards the ground, and the consequent misdirection of the search for ultimate meaning, is what Voegelin refers to as "pneumopathology" – a "disease of the spirit." The hostility towards the world that is generated through this aberrant search for meaning forms the basis of what Voegelin calls "gnosticism" – the intellectual and political manifestations of this pneumopathological orientation. For Voegelin, a defining trait of gnosticism is the theoretical construction of a "dream world:" a false model of reality that mirrors an equally false world-immanent conception of humanity.

4.1 Gnosticism and the Dream World

Because, on Voegelin's account, a political community is held together by its common understanding of the search for meaning, periods of political disorder imply a "loss of meaning that results from the breakdown of institutions [and] civilizations," which "evokes attempts to regain an understanding of the meaning of human existence." Out of one such period of disorder in the first century CE emerged the historical sect of gnosticism: "one of the most grandiose of the new formulations of the meaning of existence."[404] Voegelin, however, is less interested in historical gnosticism than he is in using the term as a heuristic to diagnose the "gnostic" mass movements of the

[403] Eric Voegelin, "Reason: The Classic Experience," p. 250

[404] Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, pp. 6–7

twentieth century. Importantly, in describing modern mass movements (among other intellectual and political trends) as "gnostic," Voegelin was not attempting to draw a genealogical link between the two. In other words, modern gnostics are not directly influenced by ancient gnostics – rather, both are "gnostic" because both derive from the same experiential basis of a revulsion towards the world as it is given and a consequent attempt to remake it.[405]

For Voegelin, gnosticism possesses six distinct characteristics: (1) A dissatisfaction with one's situation in the world; (2) A belief that this dissatisfaction is due to "the fact that the world is intrinsically poorly organized" rather than being due to the insufficiencies of humanity, or some other reason; (3) the belief that humanity may be saved from the evils of the world causing dissatisfaction; (4) the belief that, because of the poor organization of the world, this salvation must take the form of a fundamental change in the "order of being;" (5) the belief that this change in the order of the world is achievable through human action alone; (6) a drive to seek the requisite knowledge and "prescription" that makes this salvation possible – and to serve as its prophet.[406] In his more concise moments, Voegelin describes gnosticism simply as a "horror of existence and a desire to escape from it" by using human action to remake the world.[407]

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[405] This comes through in several passages from Voegelin's midcentury work. For example, in comparing a work of the ancient gnostic Zosimos to Marx, he cautions that Marx likely was not familiar with the text in question, but that the "parallel in symbolic expression corroborate[s] the essential sameness of attitudes and motives in ancient and modern gnosticism." See: Ibid., pp. 27–28

[406] Eric Voegelin, "Ersatz Religion," in *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism: Two Essays* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 1968), 55–78, pp. 59–60.

[407] Eric Voegelin, *New Science of Politics*, p. 167

In other words, because the reality of a transcendent pull can be "eclipsed but not abolished," a misdirection of the search for meaning away from transcendence and towards immanence will generate a feeling of hostility toward the order of reality that refuses to reveal the genuine ground of existence. At the same time, however, if the transcendent source of order is denied, ultimate meaning and fulfillment in this world could become *theoretically* possible – the only question is what shape this immanent fulfillment will take and what knowledge and political action is required to reshape the order of the world. The goal of all gnostic movements is therefore "abolishing the constitution of being, with its origin in divine, transcendent being, and replacing it with a world-immanent order of being, the perfection of which lies in the realm of human action." Given that it is closed to the reality of the divine ground of existence, the gnostic quest for meaning can only succeed if the "constitution of being" is itself changeable through human effort – a categorical impossibility for Voegelin.[408]

Thus, in order to make this world-transformation "*appear* possible," the gnostic intellectual must construct a dream world – a model of reality "from which those essential features of the constitution of being that would make the program appear hopeless and foolish have been eliminated." Thomas More, for example, well-aware that his "perfect state" could not exist in reality due to humanity's *superbia* and "lust for possessions" rooted in original sin, therefore removes these from his utopic construction. Hobbes, similarly, eliminates the *summum bonum*, the highest good and that aspect of reality that grounded rational ethics "beyond all intermediate stages of ends and means to a last end." Humanity within Hobbes' dream world was left to be dominated by the passions:

[408] Eric Voegelin, "Ersatz Religion," pp. 68–69

primarily aggression and the *summum malum*, the fear of death. With no way to rationally orient actions towards the highest good, order can be achieved only through passionate, fearful submission to a greater power. In general, by reducing human nature and experience as a whole to a partial "shrunken self," the gnostic intellectual is not only guilty of "deforming his humanity," but also insists that this deformed self is genuine human reality – that humanity is nothing more than the "contracted self."[409]

For Voegelin, these dream worlds are not a form of mere intellectual play, but are politically activist. Dream worlds reflect and address the fundamentally gnostic "horror of existence and...desire to escape from it." Because of this profound existential weight, the dream world – despite elevating the "nonrecognition of reality [to] a matter of principle" – will still inspire the masses towards "the readiness to fight valiantly." The result is a "very complex pneumopathological state" characterized by an "energetic and active" orientation but an inability to direct this action in alignment with the order of reality.[410] Instead, those who adhere to a distorted gnostic dream world become obsessed with "replacing the world of reality by the transfigured dream world."[411]

This obsession results in a form of "moral insanity" – actions that would be considered abhorrent in their effects when viewed from the perspective of reality become just within the dream world because, under its distorted logic, the actions "intended an entirely different effect" than the one they produced in reality. The failure of these actions to achieve this intended effect is attributed not to

[409] Ibid., pp. 68–72; Eric Voegelin, "The Eclipse of Reality," pp. 185–186

[410] Eric Voegelin, *New Science of Politics,* pp. 166–169

[411] Eric Voegelin, "Ersatz Religion," p. 72; Eric Voegelin, *New Science of Politics*, p. 169

the false image of reality, nor to the immorality of the actions themselves, but rather to the "immorality of some other person or society that does not behave as it should behave according to the dream." The dream world thus makes impossible the "rational coordination of means and ends" by hewing to a false image of humanity and a corresponding false notion of social cause and effect.[412]

While only modern fascist states have fully given themselves over to moral insanity, Voegelin claims that all modern European states are gnostic to some extent and operate within their own dream worlds. These dream worlds therefore do not only motivate the actions of totalitarian states that have fully given themselves over to moral insanity, but also prevents those states which retain a degree of "civilization" from adequately diagnosing and responding to these threats. Rather than "appropriate action in the world of reality," such threats will be:

> "met by magic operations in the dream world, such as disapproval, moral condemnation, declarations of intention, resolutions, appeals to the opinion of mankind, branding of enemies as aggressors, outlawing of war, propaganda for world peace and world government, etc. The intellectual and moral corruption which expresses itself in the aggregate of such magic operations may pervade a society with the weird, ghostly atmosphere of a lunatic asylum, as we experience it in our time in the Western crisis"[413]

Naturally, given Voegelin's context, this account is drawn from the unimpeded rise of National Socialism within Germany, confronted only by "the Gnostic chorus wailing its moral indignation at such barbarism...in a progressive world" rather than by appropriate proactive political response. The failure of the Weimar Republic to repress Nazism, and the subsequent failure of other states to counter an expansionist Germany under Nazi control, can only be interpreted, Voegelin

[412] Eric Voegelin, *New Science of Politics*, pp. 169–170

[413]Ibid., p. 170

claims, as the result of operations that appear sensible and efficacious within the "progressivist" dream world but have little impact within reality. Therefore, even in those states that have managed to partially resist gnosticism (Voegelin elsewhere names the United Kingdom and United States as examples), "contact with reality is…badly damaged," and "the pathological substitution of the dream world is fairly effective."[414] The pneumopathology of totalitarian gnosticism thereby drives its adherents to moral insanity, while the pneumopathological dream-world logic of progressivist gnosticism leads to an unfounded faith in the real-world efficacy of moral condemnation, unenforced international resolutions, and appeasement.

5. Voegelin and Mass Psychology

In keeping with his protean terminology, Voegelin sometimes refers to the dream world as a "second reality" – a term that he attributes to the writer Robert Musil, but which Eugene Webb notes was also used by Viennese psychoanalyst Otto Rank in "his discussion of the psychology of self-deception."[415] This correspondence is telling: Within the modern psychology that Voegelin repeatedly lambasts, the notion of a false image of the world, typically stemming from a hatred of the world as it exists, was a common theme, particularly in its application to mass contexts.

In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud, building on *The Future of an Illusion*, characterizes delusions as "regard[ing] reality as the sole enemy" and seeking to escape it by constructing an imaginary world "in which its most unbearable features are eliminated." The lone hermit who seeks to escape reality in this way becomes a "madman;" a large group doing the same produces religion, which

[414] Ibid., pp. 170–172, 187–189

[415] Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, p. 24; Eugene Webb, *Eric Voegelin*, p. 148

must therefore "be classed among the mass-delusions."[416] We see here a claim that, in its structure, is nearly identical to Voegelin's diagnosis of gnostic mass movements: a hatred of the real world as it exists and desire to escape it extends into the construction of a dream world that "eliminate[s] these inconveniences."[417] Freud's dedicated monograph on group psychology echoes his assessment of the "mass-delusion" of religion: "groups…demand illusions, and cannot do without them. They constantly give what is unreal precedence over what is real."[418]

Le Bon similarly emphasizes the illusory world in which the mass lives. On his account, the extreme credulity of crowds means that any event or idea posed to them is immediately "deformed" into a false "image" that spreads through the crowd as a contagion. Much like the "sets of images" that, for Voegelin, comprise a fictitious "Second Reality,"[419] these collectively held images constitute the reality of the crowd, directing its action and marking supposed enemies. The falsity of these images does not lessen their effect on the crowd; rather: "The crowd…accepts as real the images evoked in its mind," and "the unreal has almost as much influence on them as the real," such that creating these images in the minds of crowds is "at the same time the art of governing them."[420]

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[416] Sigmund Freud, "Civilization and Its Discontents," in *The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and Its Discontents, and Other Works*, ed. James Strachey, trans. Joan Riviere and James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1961), 58–145, pp. 80–83

[417] Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, p. 30

[418] Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1949), pp. 19–20

[419] Eric Voegelin, "The Eclipse of Reality," p. 187

[420] Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, trans. anon. (New York: MacMillan, 1896), pp. 24–32, 52–61

By the time of Voegelin's mid-century writing, Wilhelm Reich had already pointed to the political implications of the false world in relation to fascism, particularly its paralyzing effect on efficacious action in the real world. In an extended section of *The Mass Psychology of Fascism,* he attacks "vulgar Marxism" for rejecting psychological categories and reducing Marx's writings to mechanistic certainty. Thus, "instead of deriving theory and action from social reality, he changes reality, in his phantasy, to conform to his wishes." Much like Voegelin's account of the failure to constrain Germany in the run-up to World War II, Reich claims that this phantastical world, by obscuring a real picture of social conditions and mass action, renders those holding it unable to either achieve their own political goals or respond appropriately to the libidinal, psychological politics of fascism: "Actual problems cannot be solved with political illusions."[421]

The analysis of mass movements undertaken in crowd psychology likewise emphasizes that the ideology of the crowd, even if inchoate, stands above discussion. According to Le Bon, the "democratic dogmas" that accompanied the rise of the crowd (e.g., in the French Revolution) – the flattening of hierarchical society, universal suffrage, and even forms of "primitive communism" via economic redistribution and nationalizations of industry – bear more than a passing resonance to the absolutism of religious proclamation: "The dogmas whose birth we are witnessing will soon have the force of the old dogmas; that is to say, the tyrannical and sovereign force of being above discussion." Indeed, Le Bon describes crowds as a whole as bearing a "religious sentiment," manifested in blind

[421] Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, trans. Vincent Carfagno (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1970), pp. 10–13, 221. See also p. 277, in which Reich makes a nearly identical claim with respect to "formal democracy" – i.e. liberal democratic states: "The leaders of formal democracy…believed, in an illusory way, in the masses' capacity for freedom; thus, they relinquished any possibility of ever *bringing about* the capacity for freedom and self-responsibility in the masses."

obedience, evangelism, hostility towards outsiders, and an "inability to discuss its dogmas."[422] Freud in *Group Psychology* echoed this claim, arguing that because of the extremes of emotion to which a group is naturally drawn through its credulity, the "group knows neither doubt nor uncertainty," and as a result, it remains deeply "intolerant" to those who reject this dogma.[423] For Freud, then, the unwillingness of the crowd to discuss its dogmas is a result of the absolute certainty with which the crowd holds its beliefs, while for Le Bon, this intolerance of heterodoxy functioned to protect the integrity of the false image of the world: "Gods, heroes, and dogmas…are not to be discussed: they disappear, indeed, as soon as discussed."[424]

Voegelin places this refusal to discuss dogma at the center of his critique of modern mass movements – indeed, such a "prohibition of questions" follows necessarily from the construction of a philosophical or political system, which Voegelin sees as identical to the construction of a "dream world" that eliminates key aspects of being. In order to maintain the integrity of the system, the system must be made closed. In other words, it must reject at the outset any questions of foundational principles or premises that could jeopardize its stability.

Voegelin turns to Marxism to elaborate the prohibition of questions. Per Voegelin, the Marxian notion that man creates himself and nature through historical action (and thus exists 'of himself') serves to "shut off the process of being from transcendent being." In order to close this system to destabilizing questions, Marx anticipates an objection: The "question of the creation of the

[422] Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd*, pp. xviii, 63, 84–85, 151–153

[423] Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, pp. 15–17

[424] Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd*, p. 136

first man," which challenges the co-creation of man and nature by foregrounding the infinite regress which it implies. Marx rejects this objection by returning to the logic of his system: Such a question is on its face unreasonable and does not "'exis[t] as such for rational thought." For Voegelin, however, this notion of reason is only the one that exists within Marx's system itself; it is the reason of "socialist man" rather than man as such. Thus, Voegelin concludes, Marx demands that the questioner

> "cease to be man: he is to become socialist man...[Marx] takes the historical evolution of man into socialist man – which is part of his conceptual construct – and inserts it into his encounters with others; he calls upon the man who questions the assumptions of his system to enter into the system and undergo the evolution it prescribed. In the clash between system and reality, reality must give way.[425]

This "prohibition of questions," Voegelin makes clear, is common to all constructed "systems:" The creation of a dream world that would allow the world to be remade requires the exclusion of aspects of reality that would prevent this remaking: in Marx's case, per Voegelin, the truth that "man does not exist of himself." Any questions that contradict the logic of the dream world will therefore be rejected as trivial or irrational, the product of a mind that has not comprehended the order of reality – "reality" here referring to the distorted, partial representation of such within the dream world.

Finally, if there exists a core principle within mass psychology, it is the notion of "contagion" – the claim that sentiments, ideas, beliefs, and actions invariably spread throughout the collective mind of a mass in the same way that disease spreads through a condensed population. For Le Bon, crowds, against individual reasoning, display an extreme suggestibility that creates "contagions" through which

[425] Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, pp. 14–32

"every sentiment and act" quickly spreads through the group. While personal interest is "almost the exclusive motive of the conduct of the isolated individual," it vanishes in the pathology of the crowd: "Contagion is so powerful a force that even the sentiment of personal interest disappears under its action."[426] Freud, drawing heavily from Le Bon in his *Group Psychology*, agrees that masses "invariably give way to...contagion."[427]

For Voegelin, gnostic fantasies are similarly contagious, but not through the type of immanent psychological mechanisms – exaggerations of mimetic faculties, "hypnotic" suggestibility, etc. – emphasized by the crowd psychologists. Instead, the contagion of gnostic pathologies results from a specific orientation of the sciences of man towards a myopic focus on the phenomenal world and a corresponding refusal to engage with the "depth of the soul" and principles of existential order – the only true basis for a political science. Put another way, the contagion of gnosticism results from the social scientific mis-construction of pathology and normalcy.

This dynamic is best seen through the figure of Hobbes. According to Voegelin, Hobbes created his gnostic dream-world of the *Leviathan* in reaction to the Puritan Revolution, which, according to Voegelin, was itself a gnostic movement.[428] In this context, Hobbes correctly discarded the religious trappings of Puritanism and saw that its adherents were inspired not by "the spirit of God, but human lust for power" – his mistake was generalizing this observation into a claim that the "*libido dominandi*, which is the revolt of man against his nature and God," constituted "the essential

[426] Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd*, pp. 10–45, 128–131

[427] Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, pp. 34–35

[428] On Puritanism as a gnostic movement, see: Eric Voegelin, *New Science of Politics*, pp. 133–161

characteristic of human beings," such that not only the actions of the Puritans, but "*Every* movement of the spirit became for him a pretext for a movement of the passions."[429] Put simply, the pathological gnosticism of the Puritans was made by Hobbes into the normal state of all humanity – with this refiguration of the pathological into the normal, the only possible hope for order became an artificial one grounded in domination. For Voegelin, then, Hobbes' superficial interpretation of one instance of gnosticism ultimately turned him into gnosticism's greatest carrier.

In this dynamic also lies the root of Voegelin's critique of social-scientific positivism, which he (unsurprisingly) considers gnostic. The true danger of positivism (on Voegelin's definition, the application of the methods and principles of the natural sciences to the study of the individual and social world) lies not in "the accumulation of irrelevant facts" – perhaps its most evident manifestation – but rather in "the operation on relevant materials under defective theoretical principles." Much like the gnostic dream world, the positivist "may create an entirely false picture because essential parts are omitted." Typically, what are excluded are what the positivists refer to as "value-judgments" – metaphysical and ontological claims: But "neither classic nor Christian ethics and politics contain 'value-judgments' but elaborate, empirically and critically, the problems of order." Claims about order are not entirely eliminated within positivism, but are rather made "unquestioned axioms." Assuming, for example, that "the 'state' was a value," political science could claim objectivity, and, consequently, legitimacy, by studying "motivations, actions, and conditions that had a bearing on…states." By excluding from the outset metaphysical and ontological questions of the order of reality, positivism

[429] Eric Voegelin, "Ersatz Religion," pp. 71–73; see also: Eric Voegelin, *New Science of Politics*, pp. 178–180

becomes little more than a "handmaid of the powers that be" and presents its partial, gnostic image of the world as a precondition of legitimate analysis.[430] Having reached a certain degree of saturation, then, gnosticism becomes self-perpetuating and perpetually expanding: A myopic focus on the phenomenal world and the exclusion of metaphysical questions from social-scientific discourse delegitimates those questions and claims that might otherwise serve as a counterforce to gnosticism.

6. Conclusion

Given Voegelin's early foray into mass psychology and his continued, life-long fascination with the subject, these correspondences between mass psychology and Voegelin's account of pneumopathology cannot be seen as coincidental. That said, Voegelin did not merely transcribe these notions from mass psychology into his own work, but rather adapted them in line with his fundamental intellectual orientation towards the In-Betweenness of human life and the divine ground of existence. What Voegelin takes issue with is not the "great empirical investigations" of mass psychology – e.g., the mere observation that mass movements are characterized by a fabricated dream world, a contagion of sentiments and beliefs, and a prohibition on questions – but rather the ultimate root of these phenomena, the particular image of humanity presupposed by mass psychology. As noted in Section 2, Voegelin repeatedly criticized "modern psychology" for reducing humanity to a series of immanent motivational instincts: drives, desires, libidinal forces, etc. What this leaves out – what, for Voegelin, makes modern psychology itself a pneumopathological science – is that the true nature of humanity is not merely immanent, but also spiritual, caught in a state of In-Betweenness that

[430] Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, pp. 2, 8–13

spurs a search for meaning. Without an awareness of this "fullness of human nature" – of the human as not merely driven by rational self-interest or libidinous desires, but as irreducibly a meaning-making being – "empirical reality" will appear "flat."[431]

Voegelin therefore largely accepts the empirical observations of mass psychology, but he contends that the explanation of these phenomena, and hence possible therapeutic remedies, are based on a false conception of human nature. Whereas Freud explains mass behavior through libidinal ties both to the leader and to each other member of the mass,[432] and Le Bon points to "hidden motives…instincts, passions, feelings" to account for the same,[433] Voegelin instead points to that aspect of reality that, on his account, is not merely occluded in modern psychology, but is actively pathologized: the search for meaning that stems from the recognition of the In-Betweenness of human life. What this makes clear is that for Voegelin, any attempt to contend with political mass movements that does not take seriously the pneumopathy of a misdirected search for meaning will be both incomplete and inefficacious, regardless of the empirical detail and precision of the investigation.

Tracing this uptake and critique, in turn, clarifies Voegelin's position with respect to the question of meaning in politics. Like Schmitt, Voegelin claimed that a political order requires meaningful substance to maintain its legitimacy and stability: It must be "illuminated by meaning from within" by its members, who share an understanding of a properly ordered search for the ground of existence. This meaningful substance of the political order – which must go beyond instrumental or

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[431] Eric Voegelin, *Selected Correspondence, 1950–1984*, p. 430–432

[432] Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, pp. 44–47, 79–80

[433] Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd*, pp. 6–8

technical relations[434] – is, Voegelin says, "its essential part" because it allows the society to be experienced as "more than an accident or a convenience; they experience it as of their human essence."[435] In other words, a political community requires a meaningful substance that joins its members together in a "consciousness of kind." However, for Voegelin, meaningful frameworks are not a brute social fact, impervious to objective assessment. Rather, Voegelin claims that a political community will be genuinely "experienced as meaningful" only if it points "toward a fulfillment, toward an Eschaton, out of time."[436] Attempts at immanent meaning-making are fundamentally misaligned with the reality of In-Betweenness and, at their most extreme, end in futile totalitarian attempts to remake the order of reality in line with whatever race, class, or creed is claimed as an ultimate end – attempts that have become increasingly frequent and destructive in the thoroughly pneumopathological twentieth century.

However, Voegelin's uptake of mass psychology enabled him to escape the fatalism that drove Löwith (who similarly noted the historically conditioned nature of totalitarianism) to an individual, skeptical withdrawal. In addition to his more substantive borrowings, what mass psychology provided Voegelin was a basic understanding that the madness of the twentieth century was not an inescapable result of already-concluded historical processes, but rather derived from a pathological orientation to

[434] e.g., see: Eric Voegelin, "In Search of the Ground," p. 231: "A common interest in a profitable business…will not be a particularly sound basis for a government or for a political community."

[435] Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, pp. 27–28

[436] Eric Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, pp. 45–51

humanity's timeless existential condition of In-Betweenness – and a pathological orientation implies the possibility of a healthy orientation.

Voegelin acknowledges that the historicity of human existence means that the problem of fascism is not solvable through a return to the "substance" of past notions of political order.[437] However, Voegelin views the immanent meaning-making that manifested in fascism as mediated by historical circumstance, but as ultimately originating from a rejection of the human condition – an effacing of the pull of transcendence and misdirection of the search for meaning towards immanent reality. The particular substance of these searches for meaning differs across time and space: Historical gnosticism, fascism, and modern psychology on the one hand, and Greek philosophy, early Christian theology, and Voegelin's own philosophy on the other, are clearly distinct and historically inflected, but for Voegelin, they are joined in a fundamental spiritual orientation that is pneumopathological or normal, respectively.

For Voegelin, then, gnostic attempts at immanent meaning-making remain a constant threat to any political order, and will become more intense and dangerous during times of crisis or disaster. However, for the same reason, the possibility of healthy meaning-making will never be entirely foreclosed. Grounding both pathological and normal politics in responses to the timeless and inescapable existential condition that confronts all humans, Voegelin claims that a return to a proper orientation always remains a live possibility, and even in the midst of the twentieth century, he remained optimistic that the philosopher who allows themself to search for a locus of meaning beyond

[437] Eric Voegelin, *New Science of Politics,* p. 2

this world could serve as "a center from which radiates a new order for the existence of man in society."[438] For Voegelin, meaning and politics are co-constitutive – at least when the former is sought in the proper way.

However, Voegelin's proffered solution to the problem of meaning in politics, as avowedly drenched as it was in metaphysics, was unacceptable to the postmetaphysical thought of the philosopher addressed in the next chapter: Jürgen Habermas. In his postsecular work, Habermas addressed the question of meaning in politics from the perspective of a secular liberal polity. As we will see, despite their differences in fundamental commitments, Habermas' solution to this problem ultimately brings us back to the inaugurator of the German secularization debate: Carl Schmitt.

[438] Eric Voegelin, "What Is History?," pp. 47–49

Chapter 4: Dissolving Religion – Habermas' Varieties of Secularism

1. Introduction

The work of Jürgen Habermas, now well-into its seventh decade, evinces significant continuities in, among other topics, his consistent fascination with the public (as distinct from the political) sphere, his critiques of the regulatory role of purposive-rational systems, and his concerns with the legitimation of political forms and power. A rare and apparently radical break in his thought occurred around 2001, as Habermas, faced with religiously motivated political violence and, arguably more importantly, religiously inflected American rhetoric, began to reconsider his earlier dismissal of religion as lying, at least in its political and social efficacy, well in the past. Rather than a modern world in which religion was – descriptively, as a condition of modernity – absent from politics, Habermas was now faced with a world in which secularism could not be assumed as a historical fact, but rather had to become an active political principle. In this process of contending with this shift, Habermas found himself faced with many of the same problems that vexed Carl Schmitt eight decades prior.

Understandably, Habermas' early accounts of religion have, in the eyes of most scholars, merited little comment. As Philippe Portier notes, Habermas' early views of religion were deeply influenced by his predecessors in the first generation of the Frankfurt School, which, in Habermas' case, manifested in viewing religion as "a tool of the powerful" and consequently "hop[ing] for the 'disappearance' of religion" in the name of liberty. Habermas' "positivist philosophy of history" prior to the 1990s was guided by this hope, moving humanity through three stages of progressive

rationalization.[439] Indeed, Habermas' "evolutionary" model of societal development that persisted from the 1960s through the 1980s resulted in the easy and, in the words of one scholar, "crude" dismissal of "the relevance of religion in modernity."[440] Habermas himself later acknowledged that this prior "one-sided, functionalist" description of religion "subsumed rather too hastily the development of religion in modernity with Max Weber under the 'privatization of the powers of faith'" and that religion itself would cease to be relevant once broader "religious world views have collapsed."[441]

However, even after Habermas' postsecular turn placed religion at the forefront of his political theory, it has continued to receive "limited attention" from scholars when compared to other aspects of his thought.[442] In those cases Habermas' postsecular turn is engaged, it is nearly always from the perspective of normative political philosophy, seeking to evaluate the legitimacy of Habermas' criticisms of strict secularism, as well as the suitability of his remedies to these perceived flaws – e.g., in the persistent question of whether Habermas' postsecular principles continue to impose asymmetric burdens on religious citizens by excluding religious reasons from the political (as opposed to the public) sphere.[443] This reflects a broader tendency to read Habermas in the context of other attempts

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[439] Philippe Portier, "Religion and Democracy in the Thought of Jürgen Habermas," *Society* 48, no. 5 (2011): 426–32. Matt Sheedy argues that this influence persisted into the 1990s, albeit with a shift of focus to Walter Benjamin and Ernst Bloch. See: Matt Sheedy, "Habermas and Religion," *Religion Compass* 10, no. 3 (2016): 58–73, p. 61

[440] Masoumeh Bahram, "Habermas, Religion, and Public Life," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 28, no. 3 (2013): 353–67, pp. 356–358

[441] Jürgen Habermas, "Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in This World," in *Habermas, Modernity, and Public Theology*, ed. Don S. Browning and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, trans. Eric Crump and Peter P. Kenny (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 226–50, p. 79

[442] Masoumeh Bahram, "Habermas, Religion, and Public Life."

[443] Melissa Yates, "Rawls and Habermas on Religion in the Public Sphere," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 33, no. 7 (2007): 880–91; Cathrine Holst and Anders Molander, "Jürgen Habermas on Public Reason and Religion: Do Religious Citizens Suffer an Asymmetrical Cognitive Burden, and Should They Be Compensated?," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 18, no. 5 (2015): 547–63.

by liberal philosophers to contend with the public presence of religion within a secular state. Among such interlocutors, John Rawls is easily the most prominent, owing in part to the significant 1995 debate between Rawls and Habermas in the pages of the *Journal of Philosophy,*[444] as well as the influence of Rawls' "proviso" in *Political Liberalism* on Habermas' own "institutional translation proviso," which forms the core of his postsecularism.[445] These accounts typically take both a comparative and normative approach, teasing out the differences between Rawls' "proviso" and Habermas' "institutional translation proviso" (often with reference to Habermas' attempt to overcome common criticisms leveled at Rawls) and siding with one or another, or occasionally dismissing both as too lenient or strict with respect to public religion.[446]

This tendency to engage Habermas through the lens of the suitability of his postsecular prescriptions to both a pluralistic world and religiously neutral state is understandable, particularly as Habermas explicitly frames his postsecularism as an attempt to formulate a response to the demands of the latter and reality of the former. However, I suggest that reading Habermas instead through the lens

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[444] On the 1995 Habermas-Rawls debate, see: James Gordon Finlayson, *The Habermas-Rawls Debate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019); Charles Larmore, "The Moral Basis of Political Liberalism," *The Journal of Philosophy* 96, no. 12 (1999): 599–625.

[445] For Habermas' engagement with Rawls on this point, see: Jürgen Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," trans. Jeremy Gaines, *European Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (2006): 1–25.

[446] Cristina Lafont, "Religion in the Public Sphere: Remarks on Habermas's Conception of Public Deliberation in Postsecular Societies," *Constellations* 14, no. 2 (2007): 236–56; James Gordon Finlayson, "No Proviso: Habermas on Rawls, Religion and Public Reason," *European Journal of Political Theory* 20, no. 3 (2021): 443–64; Melissa Yates, "Rawls and Habermas on Religion in the Public Sphere." Other interlocutors include figures similarly associated with the reassessment of secularism, particularly Charles Taylor. For two examples which land on the side of, respectively, Taylor and Habermas, see: Ulrike Spohn, "A Difference in Kind? Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor on Postsecularism," *The European Legacy* 20, no. 2 (2015): 120–35; Philippe-Antoine Hoyeck, "Religion and Democracy: Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor on the Public Use of Reason," *The European Legacy* 26, no. 2 (2021): 111–30. While Habermas' own engagements with Taylor have not been as prominent as his debate(s) with Rawls, the two did cross paths at least once, in a 2011 publication. See: Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor, "Dialogue: Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor," in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 60–69.

of the German secularization debate reveals a distinct set of problems and concerns in his postsecular work and can illuminate the always-fraught dynamics that attend attempts by a liberal procedural politics to regulate the proper role of sources of substantive meaning within such a politics.

Reading Habermas as a late entrant into the German secularization debate requires no great interpretive leap. Indeed, as indicated by citations in previous chapters of this dissertation, Habermas has engaged at length with the key figures of the German secularization debate and has taken seriously some of the key terms of the debate, such as decisionism and political theology.[447] Moreover, as noted by Sjoerd Griffioen, the German secularization debate has served as a frequent point of reference within postsecular theorizing.[448] Perhaps most pointedly, however, Habermas himself connected the situation to which his postsecular writing responds to the origins of the German secularization debate: "even today, there is a ready audience for the theory that the remorseful modern age can find its way out of the blind alley only by means of the religious orientation to a transcendent point of reference...This reminds one of the mood in the Weimar Republic in Germany after the First World War – it evokes Carl Schmitt, Martin Heidegger, or Leo Strauss."[449]

Habermas, of course, rejects Schmitt's response to this mood, but it is clear that he takes more from Schmitt than a negative example and cautionary tale. While secondary literature on Habermas'

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[447] On decisionism, see: Jürgen Habermas, "The Scientization of Politics and Public Opinion," in *Towards a Rational Society: Student Protest, Science, and Politics*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Polity, 1987), 62–80. On political theology, see: Jürgen Habermas, "'The Political': The Rational Meaning of a Questionable Inheritance of Political Theology," in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 15–33.

[448] On the relationship of both Habermas and postsecularism in general to the German secularization debate, see: Sjoerd Griffioen, *Contesting Modernity in the German Secularization Debate*, pp. 405–411

[449] Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*, ed. Florian Schuller, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), pp. 37–38

postsecularism tends to emphasize his attempts to ameliorate the "asymmetric burden" faced by religious citizens when engaging in the public sphere, his own assessment of the problem to which postsecularism responds is far closer to the one diagnosed by Schmitt himself. Schmitt, let us not forget, was driven to his political theology and concept of the political, at least on his own account, in response to the depoliticizing conditions of his era – the "economic-technical thinking" that had expanded to encompass ever-larger spaces of public life and, its corollary, the liberal state that reduced politics to bureaucratic management and technocratic compromises between disparate interest groups. For Habermas, the problem, one previewed by his long-running concern with functional subsystems and the lifeworld, is strikingly similar:

> "Markets, which cannot be democratized like the administration of a state, are taking over an increasing number of regulatory functions in areas of life that hitherto were held together in a normative manner, that is, by political structures or via pre-political forms of communication. This means not only that private spheres increasingly adopt an orientation to trade mechanisms that aim at profit and at the realization of individual preferences; at the same time, the sphere where public legitimation is necessary is likewise shrinking."[450]

Indeed, Habermas himself notes this correspondence between his and Schmitt's concerns and finds little to quibble with in Schmitt's account of liberal depoliticization: "In liberalism Carl Schmitt combats the enemy that destroys 'the political' through *neuralization*...the diagnosis of a progressive 'negation of the political' does not seem to have been refuted." Habermas even goes so far as to say that "Admittedly, everything feared by Carl Schmitt in fact happened," including the diminishing of democratic power in favor of rational-bureaucratic decision procedures.[451]

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[450] Ibid., p. 36

[451] Jürgen Habermas, "The Political," pp. 22–23, 27

Naturally, for all this agreement in diagnosis, Habermas dismisses Schmitt's "clericofascist" remedy, and critics of Schmitt within the German secularization debate are of similarly little help: Löwith's "stoic" orientation of withdrawal from politics is a non-starter,[452] and Voegelin's claim of an ultimate "ground" from which can emerge a proper order of human affairs is far too drenched in metaphysics to be a live possibility. Nonetheless, the meaning-making power of religion so key to Schmitt, Löwith, and Voegelin plays a crucial role in Habermas' postsecularism: while it must be kept within defined limits so as not to threaten the secular state, religion for Habermas can safeguard genuine politics by offering a preserved reservoir of meaning: "moral intuitions," normative concepts, and diagnoses of "societal pathologies" and the "disfigurement of the lives that people share with each other" – all of which can both serve as a source of social solidarity for religious citizens while also challenging the legitimacy and necessity of the market and bureaucracy in regulating public life.[453]

In this Chapter, I trace Habermas' response to the problem of meaning in politics by focusing on his functionalist approach to religion. I emphasize a key shift that occurred in Habermas' postsecular turn from functionalism as a descriptive or explanatory framework to functionalism as a generator of normative principles. This shift reflects a broader reorientation in Habermas' approach to religion: from secularism as an inescapable condition of modernity (via an already-completed process of secularization) to secularism as an active political principle that involves the management of sources of meaning – when and how they are to be included in public/political sphere, and when and how

[452] As noted in Chapter 2, Habermas was one of the first to characterize (and criticize) Löwith as advocating a "stoic retreat." See: Jürgen Habermas, "Karl Löwith."

[453] e.g., Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *Dialectics of Secularization*, pp. 36, 43–44

they are to be excluded. In the process of making this shift, however, Habermas is forced to establish foundational values that ground his normative functionalism, which has the effect of turning secularism itself into a religion – not on the basis of superficial resonances or functional identity (which, as discussed in the next subsection, has produced no shortage of "secular religions"), but rather per Habermas' own definition of religion as a partially open foundation of discourse that contains an unchallengeable core. The notion of liberalism or secularism as itself a religion is hardly a new one. However, my claim is limited to Habermas' own work – I do not argue that secularism itself is "actually" a religion (in whatever sense), but rather that, in Habermas' postsecular theorizations, it appears as such per his own definitions.

I suggest that this curious convergence between Habermas' theory of postsecularism and his definition of religion reflects the difficulties of approaching the Schmittian problem of meaning and politics with a commitment to the neutrality of the state vis-à-vis substantive conceptions of the good life and the proper order of human affairs. As soon as Habermas recognizes the issue of meaning in politics – its importance in maintaining solidarity and political action against mechanistic regulation – he is faced with the problem of how to manage meaningful (and hence, in his postsecularism, religious) claims in the public and political spheres. This, I argue, forces him to establish the principle of the secular state as itself the highest good – as a (in Schmittian terms) "substantive" meaningful framework suggesting a proper order of human affairs, secularism provides a litmus strip against which all possible contributions (and associated threats) of religion are evaluated. Ultimately, therefore, Habermas' postsecular transformation of secularism from a historical fact to an active political principle returns him to Schmitt: "life struggles not with death, spirit not with spiritlessness; spirit

struggles with spirit, life with life."[454] In Habermas' theory, a full-throated neutrality and total openness of principles to discursive contestation is incapable of properly leveraging and managing meaningful claims – this requires secularism, not considered as neutrality with respect to religion, nor as the relegation of religion to the private sphere, but as a meaningful framework that is able to include and exclude such claims on the basis of a fundamental, incontestable order of human affairs.

Sub-section 1.1 frames my engagement with Habermas by briefly introducing functionalist approaches to both description and normative evaluation. Section 2 examines Habermas' account of religion up to the mid-1980s, with a particular focus on his functionalist method and the historical-developmental place of religion in his writings. Section 3 examines how Habermas' development of the notion of postmetaphysical thinking pushed the question of religion and its relation to philosophy to the forefront of his thought. Finally, Section 5 examines how, with Habermas' postsecular turn, the question of religion and politics became central to his work, necessitating a shift to secularism as a substantive and active political principle.

1.1 Introduction: Functionalism, Descriptive and Normative

Volume 2 of *The Theory of Communicative Action* takes direct critical aim at functionalist reason – initially in the subtitle of the volume itself, but more importantly in Habermas' well-known account of the "colonization of the lifeworld."[455] In subsequent commentary, however, the relation of Habermas' own work to functionalist thinking has been a point of contention, with some arguing that

[454] Carl Schmitt, *The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations*, p. 96

[455] Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), p. 196

the critique of functionalist reason does not go far enough and one scholar describing Habermas' own project as an "unhappy marriage of hermeneutics and functionalism" owing to his distinction between lifeworld and system.[456]

In this chapter, I argue that, whatever Habermas' criticisms of functionalist reason within purposive-rational subsystems, his approach to studying the topic of religion has consistently adopted a functionalist framework. Initially, in his work up to the 1990s, this functionalism was descriptive: religion was considered as or in relation to the function it served in (past) societies and politics. With Habermas' postsecular turn around 2001, this descriptive functionalism shifted into a normative functionalism: religion was no longer analyzed descriptively in terms of its functions, but rather evaluated normatively in terms of the function it properly *should* serve within a liberal democratic politics.

Functionalism, particularly in its descriptive mode associated with figures like Durkheim, Parsons, and Malinowski,[457] has been criticized from a number of angles. On one hand, defining religion based on function (e.g., social cohesion) has the effect of characterizing anything that serves that function as a "religion," which can quickly result in untenable or even absurd ascriptions of religiosity to even the most secular (and even the most trivial) phenomena. As Melford Spiro puts it, within a functionalist approach, "it is virtually impossible to set any substantive boundary to religion

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[456] Hans Joas, "The Unhappy Marriage of Hermeneutics and Functionalism," in *Communicative Action: Essays on Jürgen Habermas's* The Theory of Communicative Action, ed. Alex Honneth and Hans Joas, trans. Jeremy Gaines and Doris L. Jones (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 97–118; Titus Stahl, "Habermas and the Project of Immanent Critique," *Constellations* 20, no. 4 (2013): 533–52.

[457] Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, p. 44; Talcott Parsons, *Action Theory and the Human Condition* (New York: Free Press, 1978), pp. 250–251; Bronislaw Malinowski, "Magic, Science, and Religion," in *Magic, Science, and Religion, and Other Essays* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1948), 1–124, pp. 37–41, 122. Malinowski criticizes Durkheim's broader sociology of religion but nonetheless makes use of a functionalist framework.

and, thus, to distinguish it from other sociocultural phenomena."[458] A definitional functionalist approach is what to this day enables, for example, claims that modern medicine,[459] New Age spirituality,[460] workplaces,[461] human rights,[462] evolutionary thinking,[463] and even selfie photographs[464] constitute "secular religions." Functionalism has encountered controversy even when it seeks not to define terms like "religion" but rather to analyze religion (defined in whatever way) through the functions it serves. Despite routing through a purportedly value-neutral sociology, functionalism is often criticized for being small-c conservative. Critics have argued that while functionalism "is not intrinsically ideological," it is nonetheless "intrinsically political" and tends towards a defense and legitimation of the social status quo.[465] Alvin Gouldner, for example, claims that the focus of functionalism on the necessary conditions of social stability generates a false dichotomy between (the

[458] Melford E. Spiro, "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation," in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Banton (New York: Routledge, 2010), 85–126.

[459] Jan Domaradzki, "Extra Medicinam Nulla Salus: Medicine as a Secular Religion," *Polish Sociological Review* 181, no. 1 (2013): 21–38

[460] Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "New Age Spiritualities as Secular Religion: A Historian's Perspective," *Social Compass* 46, no. 2 (1999): 145–60; Dave Vliegenthart, "(Re)Introducing 'Secular Religion': On the Study of Entangled Quests for Meaning in Modern Western Cultures," *Numen* 67, no. 2–3 (2020): 256–79

[461] Blake E. Ashforth and Deepa Vaidyanath, "Work Organizations as Secular Religions," *Journal of Management Inquiry* 11, no. 4 (2002): 359–70

[462] Henri Féron, "Human Rights and Faith: A 'World-Wide Secular Religion'?," *Ethics & Global Politics* 7, no. 4 (2014): 181–200; Daniel S. Malachuk, "Human Rights and a Postsecular Religion of Humanity," *Journal of Human Rights* 9, no. 2 (2010): 127–42

[463] Michael Ruse, *The Evolution-Creation Struggle* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005). See also the review by Brooke: John Hedley Brooke, "A Secular Religion: Should Evolutionism Be Viewed as a Modified Descendant of Christianity?," *Nature* 437 (2005): 815–16

[464] Mathias Ephraim Nygaard, "Selfies as Secular Religion: Transcending the Self," *Journal of Religion & Society* 21 (2019): 1–21

[465] Irving Louis Horowitz, "Sociology and Politics: The Myth of Functionalism Revisited," *The Journal of Politics* 25, no. 2 (1963): 248–64, pp. 250–252

existing) order and anarchic disorder and "thereby makes it seem as if a preference for order is the only reasonable choice."[466] The purported value-neutrality of functionalism may, if anything, contribute to its conservatism, as in the absence of any differentiation of "good from bad goals, stultifying from liberating institutions, efficient from inefficient customs,"[467] the eufunctional can easily be mapped onto "good" and the dysfunctional onto "bad" – in other words, the positive and negative evaluations that are explicitly absent become implicitly attached to that which supports the stability of the status quo and that which disrupts it, respectively.

Though less common than its descriptive variants, functionalism has also been leveraged within normative political philosophy, particularly in theories of democracy.[468] Under this form of functionalism, a specific set of characteristics is posited as crucial to the functioning and stability of a democratic system, with institutions, actions, and organizational types normatively evaluated on the basis of whether they function to support these characteristics. As Mark Warren notes, whereas descriptive functionalism contains only implicit evaluations, normative functionalism makes explicit

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[466] Alvin W. Gouldner, *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (London: Heinemann, 1970), pp. 251–254, 331–337. Gouldner does acknowledge that functionalism is amenable to a limited critical impulse, but critique in a functionalist mould takes the form of adjustments around the margins rather than foregrounding "possibilities of a future significantly different from the present."

[467] Elgin Williams and Dorothy Gregg, "The Dismal Science of Functionalism," *American Anthropologist* 50, no. 4 (1948): 594–611; see also: Kingsley Davis, "The Myth of Functional Analysis as a Special Method in Sociology and Anthropology," *American Sociological Review* 24, no. 6 (1959): 757–72, p. 766

[468] For some recent examples, see: Maija Jäske and Maija Setälä, "A Functionalist Approach to Democratic Innovations," *Representation* 56, no. 4 (2020): 467–83; Mark E. Warren, "A Problem-Based Approach to Democratic Theory;" Kevin J. Elliott, "An Institutional Duty to Vote: Applying Role Morality in Representative Democracy," *Political Theory* 51, no. 6 (2023): 897–924; Samuel Bagg and Udit Bhatia, "Intra-party Democracy: A Functionalist Account," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 30, no. 3 (2022): 347–69; Jane Mansbridge et al., "A Systemic Approach to Deliberative Democracy," in *Deliberative Systems: Deliberative Democracy at the Large Scale*, ed. John Parkinson and Jane Mansbridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1–26.

the evaluations that hide behind the notion of "objective functions."[469] We see in Habermas' shift from descriptive to normative functionalism a similar dynamic: specifically, whereas in his earlier work Habermas provided a descriptive functionalist account of the modernization and decline of religion amid increasing communicative rationality, in his postsecular work, this account shifts from an already-completed process in the past to a normative imperative in the present. Similarly, now trying to manage the public presence of religion, Habermas is forced to make clear and defend the normative core of his secularism rather than assume it as an inescapable condition of modernity. This results in a partial closure of the openness of discourse, wherein the core principle of secularism is itself removed from intersubjective contestation and legitimation.

2. Habermas and Religion

Even periodizing Habermas' oeuvre can seem like a monumental undertaking. He has written "on virtually every topic that has been taken up by philosophers and social scientists,"[470] and his work evinces both important consistencies and fundamental shifts. When surveying his thought specifically on the topic of religion, however, a clearer picture begins to form. Habermas' key work on religion falls into two distinct periods.[471] The first period, which runs roughly from 1968's "Technology and

[469] Mark E. Warren, "A Problem-Based Approach to Democratic Theory," p. 42

[470] David Ingram, *Habermas: Introduction and Analysis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), p. xiii

[471] This division excludes some early comments from Habermas on religion in the 1960s, but these engagements are typically scattered and/or limited to the occasional insight into the biographical importance of (a specific) religion in the development of a philosopher's thought. In "The German Idealism of the Jewish Philosophers" (1961), for example, Habermas notes the influence of both the sociological German-Jewish experience, as well as certain ideas within Jewish mysticism (kabbalism arguably above all), on the development of Idealism. More common in this era, however, is the treatment given to religion in 1962's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Religion plays a fairly minor role in this piece – its most prominent appearance involves Habermas' claim that the Hobbesian privatization of religion supported the eventual revaluation of the idea of "opinion" and "public opinion" in later writers. Despite this brief engagement, religion, in the words of Craig Calhoun, "goes virtually unmentioned in [the] discussion of the public sphere in seventeenth-century Britain," as well as Habermas' account as a whole. See: Jürgen Habermas, "The German

Science as Ideology" up through *The Theory of Communicative Action* is characterized by two primary elements. First, religion in these writings is framed as a key stage in the development of the modern world. While its treatment in individual works can vary, religion almost always constitutes an intermediate stage in this process – compared to myth, it is more rational, more internally differentiated (e.g., encompassing the distinction between practical and theoretical questions, or between culture and nature), and, especially towards the end of this period, it enables greater freedom of communication. Yet, it achieves these advances only partially – religion in these accounts is superseded and dissolved by a secular modern age that proves even more rational and differentiated and allows a greater range of communicative action.

The central role played by religion in this period of Habermas' work necessitated a second inclusion: the articulation of religion as a worldview or structure of life with a distinct set of characteristics that set it apart from both myth and modernity. As Donald Rothberg puts it, this takes on a "formal" quality – Habermas is interested not so much in the beliefs, doctrine, or general "content" of any particular religion, but rather in the "level of development manifest according to criteria such as differentiation, reflexivity, and so on."[472] As we will see, key to this development of a formal model of religious worldviews is a focus on their past functions within the social and political

Idealism of the Jewish Philosophers," in *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 37–59. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Boston: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 89–102; Craig J. Calhoun, "Civil Society and Political Life," *Contemporary Sociology* 19, no. 2 (1990): 312–16, p. 315

[472] Donald Jay Rothberg, "Rationality and Religion in Habermas' Recent Work: Some Remarks on the Relation Between Critical Theory and the Phenomenology of Religion," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 11, no. 3 (1986): 221–43, p. 225

worlds – social integration, the legitimation of power, etc. – as well as on how these functions were performed.

The second period in Habermas' treatment of religion begins in the mid-1980s with the development of his idea of post-metaphysical thinking and continues to the present day. His approach again shifts in two key ways: First, while it still appears occasionally, the developmental framework that structured much of Habermas' engagements with religion up through *The Theory of Communicative Action* recedes into the background. Religion is here considered not as something that was efficacious in a past stage of societal development and has since been superseded, but as something that remains present and operative in the modern age. Habermas' functionalism follows this shift in perspective: whereas religion was previously considered to have a crucial role in past societies but none in the present, it now fulfills a crucial function that enables it to either coexist with or actively support modern philosophy and politics. This newfound modern importance of religion demanded a second key shift in this period: A move away from a purely formal account of religion and a greater willingness to engage with both specific religious claims, beliefs, and ideas, as well as concrete historical and ongoing interactions between religion, philosophy, and politics. Habermas' postsecular turn falls into this periodization: As argued below, after 2001 Habermas did not so much change his basic approach to religion, but rather turn the theories and frameworks he had been developing since the mid-1980s to the purpose of articulating and defending the partial inclusion of religious claims into the public political sphere.

2.1 Religion as a Developmental Stage

One of Habermas earliest detailed articulations of religion as a stage of social development occurs in 1968's "Technology and Science as 'Ideology.'" In this piece, Habermas attempts to come to terms with the relation between modernity and rationalization – part of his broader project at the time of attempting to "construct a 'left' alternative to the technological determinism arising in part from Heidegger,"[473] as well as reevaluate the critique of instrumental rationality found in the first generation of the Frankfurt School on the basis of the distinction between lifeworld and system.

Unsatisfied with Marcuse's and Weber's accounts of the "rationalization of society," Habermas launches his own theorizing with a categorical distinction between "work" and "interaction." *Work* in this piece is identified with "purposive-rational action" – a mode of activity that uses "technical rules" to pursue end goals that are derived via a combination of pre-existing value systems and "decision procedures." In contrast, *interaction* is identified with "communicative action," which produces mutual expectations of behavior that are bound by consensus-based norms grounded in intersubjective understanding. This generates a further distinction between those social sub-systems which operate through interaction – the "institutional framework…or the sociocultural life-world" of a society – and those that operate through purposive-rational action.[474]

This typology then guides Habermas' account of the rationalization of society through three stages: primitive, traditional, and modern. Largely skipping over the first of these, Habermas defines a traditional society as one that displays (1) a centralization of power; (2) the emergence of distinct

[473] William Outhwaite, *Habermas: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd ed (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2009), p. 6

[474] Jürgen Habermas, "Technology and Science as 'Ideology,'" in *Toward a Rational Society: Student Protest, Science, and Politics*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 81–122, pp. 91–94

socioeconomic classes; and (3) a "central worldview (myth, complex, religion)" that legitimates political power. While the first two of these distinguish traditional from primitive societies,[475] it is the third that distinguishes traditional from modern societies. The life-world of a traditional society is "grounded in the unquestionable underpinning of legitimation constituted by mythical, religious, or metaphysical interpretations of [both cosmic and social] reality," which disallows any critical challenge to political legitimation, while any purposive-rational subsystems remain limited by the relatively stable output of precapitalist production and technology. The threshold of modernity is reached when these productive forces accelerate and find institutionalized form in robust markets for both goods and labor. This initial foothold ensures further "progress in the forces of production," which increasingly encompasses social structures within purposive-rational subsystems – initially including state financial administration, followed by "state bureaucracy" as a whole. As this expansion of the sphere of purposive-rational action increasingly challenges political legitimacy based in myth or religion – which are grounded in "the logic of interaction contexts" and address themselves to substantive normative (rather than instrumental) concerns – religion and myth lose their unquestionable and objective status and retreat into a role of subjectively ensuring "the private cogency of modern value-orientations." Publicly, religious and mythical systems in their legitimating function give way to ideologies, which similarly render "actual power relations inaccessible to analysis" – this time claiming unquestionable legitimacy through the language of modern science.[476] However, a second form of rationalization

[475] Rather than centralized power and class divisions, primitive societies for Habermas display "tribal organization" and the allocation of "social obligations and rewards…according to kinship status."

[476] Jürgen Habermas, "Technology and Science as 'Ideology,'" pp. 94–99, 114

points to a way out of this purposive-rational "negative utopia" – the rationalization of the life-world's communicative structures can provide an interactive counterpoint to the dominance of work by housing "public, unrestricted discussion, free from domination, of the suitability and desirability of action-orienting principles and norms" in relation to purposive-rational sub-systems.[477]

"Technology and Science as 'Ideology'" established many of the themes that would continue to be core to Habermas' work on religion into the 1980s: Unlike in his scattered earlier remarks, religion in this piece takes on both a definite function (as a legitimator of political power) and a definite relation to the rationalization of both system and lifeworld that gradually overtakes it. In the next decade, Habermas would continue to deepen this account of religion within social development, disentangling religion from myth (which remain largely aggregated in "Technology and Science as 'Ideology'") and further specifying its structure, evolutionary dynamics, and functions.

Legitimation Crisis (1973) sees Habermas taking up new influences, including "systems theory and the cognitive psychology of Jean Piaget"[478] that provide his developmental account of society with a framework grounded in analogy with cognitive "learning processes" during childhood. Habermas again distinguishes between instrumental action (work) operating via truth-claims and communicative action (interaction) operating via norm-claims that require discursive justification. The development of each of these types of action follows a particular pattern that can be rationally reconstructed. Drawing from Piaget's theory of childhood ontogenesis, Habermas maps the "regularities" in this development in worldviews through five aspects: (1) the expansion of the secular at the expense of the

[477] Ibid., pp. 113, 118–122

[478] Andrew Edgar, *The Philosophy of Habermas* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), p. 102

sacred; (2) a shift from human heteronomy to human autonomy; (3) the divestment of objectivating truth-claims from worldviews; (4) a movement from "tribal particularism" to both universalism and individualism; and (5) the "increasing reflexivity of the mode of belief, which can be seen in the sequence: myth as immediately lived system of orientation; teachings; revealed religion; rational religion; ideology." The transition between these different stages is determined by the "phylogenetic" growth in a collective's "institutionally permitted learning capacity," dependent on (1) the differentiation between "theoretical and practical questions"; and (2) the predominance of "reflexive learning," in which learning is discursive and claims are accepted or rejected on the basis of argumentation, over "non-reflexive learning," in which claims are "naively taken for granted."[479]

Religion in both its forms (revealed and rational) occupies a mediate position in this developmental account – more reflexive and universalistic than the mere myth that precedes it, but less so than the ideology that succeeds it. In addition, the scope of religion's function expands in this piece compared to "Technology and Science as 'Ideology'" – whereas in the latter, Habermas assigned to religion (and traditional worldviews in general) the relatively narrow task of legitimating political power, in *Legitimation Crisis*, religion occupies the expanded functional role of constituting and mediating between individual and collective identities and connecting these to human engagements with the natural world in such a way that the contingencies of "an imperfectly controlled environment" are "made bearable."[480] However, as secular knowledge increasingly renders the natural

[479] Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1988), pp. 11–16

[480] For Habermas, political legitimation represents a subset of this broader role: "The legitimation of orders of authority and basic norms can be understood as a specialization of this meaning-giving function." Importantly, the scope of the function Habermas ascribes to religion shifted throughout his earlier writings depending, at least in part, on the

environment controllable, worldviews divest themselves of objectivating truth-claims, and the unified interpretation of the individual's relation to natural and social environment collapses. The sciences claim exclusive validity over interpretations of nature, while religion retreats to the more limited function of social integration. At the same time, however, this need for a social-integrative force is amplified as society becomes increasingly complex and the individual finds themself subject to a proliferation of contingencies stemming from "uncontrolled social processes." Having divested themselves of truth claims, religious worldviews are rendered incapable of adequately addressing these newfound contingencies. Without the unified interpretation of a worldview, "morality is formalized and detached from substantive interpretations" and practical reason, while "communicative ethics appeals now only to fundamental norms of rational speech" – which, as a simple "fact of reason," contains no "normative force that organizes the self-understanding of men and orients their action."[481]

Legitimation Crisis takes Habermas' functionalist approach to religion from "Technology and Science as 'Ideology'" and expands it. Unlike in the latter piece, *Legitimation Crisis* separates myth and religion on the basis of reflexivity, assigning religion a higher developmental status.[482] At the same time, religion as an orienting worldview remains something superseded – something "irrecoverably

topical focus of different texts. In 1974's "Legitimation Problems in the Modern State," for example, religion is once again considered solely as a source of pre-modern political legitimacy (albeit one that can backfire when "insurgents appeal to the original religious content of the doctrine"). See: Jürgen Habermas, "Legitimation Problems in the Modern State," in *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), 178–205, p. 181

[481] Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis,* pp. 117–120

[482] This newfound positive relation between religion and communication is reflected, if only indirectly, in Habermas' discussion of the grounding effect of the objective idea of God within the communicative structures of contemporary German Protestant theology. See: Ibid., pp. 120–122

criticized" and belonging "irretrievably to the past."[483] This communicative advance of religion over myth is further elaborated in "Historical Materialism and the Development of Normative Structures" – the 1976 introduction to *Zur Rekonstruction des Historischen Materialismus.* Largely reproducing the developmental framework of *Legitimation Crisis*, this piece portrays the rationalization of myth as giving rise to cosmologies, philosophies, and the "higher religions."[484] These new worldviews constituted a liberation of discourse, as the narrative and exemplary content of myth was condensed into "first principles" that both enabled "deductive explanation" and served as "argumentative foundations." The liberation of discourse remained incomplete, however, so long as these foundations themselves, "to which all argumentation must refer" remained "removed from argumentation and immunized against objections." Only in the final stage of development would the "universalistic potential" of these rationalized worldviews be "set free" as religion retreated into the realm of subjectivity and first principles became contestable.[485]

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[483] Ibid., p. 120

[484] It is difficult in this context not to connect Habermas' account of the transition from "archaic to developed civilizations" to Karl Jaspers' concept of the Axial Age between 800 and 200 B.C.E., in which philosophy and the "world religions" emerged, myth dissolved into the background of religion, and "man becomes conscious of Being as a whole, of himself and his limitations. He experiences the terror of the world and his own powerlessness. He asks radical questions. Face to face with the void he strives for liberation and redemption. By consciously recognising his limits he sets himself the highest goals." See: Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans. Michael Bullock (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), pp. 1–3. Habermas' thought, particularly that concerned with societal development and the evolution of worldviews, approaches or draws on Jaspers throughout his career. On Habermas' appropriation and use of the axial age concept, see: Dafydd Huw Rees, "Decolonizing Philosophy? Habermas and the Axial Age," *Constellations* 24, no. 2 (2017): 219–31; Eduardo Mendieta, "The Axial Age, Social Evolution, and Postsecular Consciousness," *Critical Research on Religion* 6, no. 3 (2018): 289–308; Carmen Lea Dege, "Myth, Modernity, and the Legacy of the Axial Age: Taylor, Habermas, Assmann, and Jaspers," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 84, no. 4 (2023): 743–73.

[485] Jurgen Habermas, "Historical Materialism and the Development of Normative Structures," in *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), 95–129, pp. 104–106

The ideas concerning religion established in these works, particularly its intermediate status within the development of the modern world, its partial constriction of communication, and its role as a legitimating and integrative force, converge in the monumental *Theory of Communicative Action* (*TCA*). Habermas' social-developmental framework reappears, now focused more specifically on the conditions of possibility of rational communicative action. Myth again constitutes a primitive worldview: a totalizing network of resemblances, identities, analogies, and contrasts that unifies the individual, social, and natural worlds. This unity disallows strong distinctions between nature and culture – between "objects that can be manipulated and...subjects capable of speaking and acting" – and thus also disallows a distinction between instrumental and communicative action. This confusion of nature and culture is further reflected in a conflation of "language and world," manifested, for example, in the claimed "magical relation" in mythological worldviews between a word and the object or processes it represents in the natural world. Lacking distinctions between language and what it describes, the mythological worldview becomes coterminous with the "world-order itself to such an extent that it cannot be perceived as an interpretation of the world that is subject to error and open to criticism" and thus cannot make possible "rational orientations to action in our sense."[486]

The development from mythical to religious-metaphysical and from religious-metaphysical to modern worldviews occurs as a learning process through which the "formal world-concepts" of the subjective, intersubjective and natural worlds develop and become distinct both from each other and from language, enabling differentiated validity claims (expressive sincerity, normative rightness, and

[486] Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), pp. 44–50

propositional truth, respectively). These claims are criticizable not just because of the newfound separation of language and world, but also because the objective natural world and intersubjective social world assume realities that are separate from yet shared by all participants – consequently, linguistic utterances can be criticized as better or worse representations of this shared world. As a society develops, therefore, the scope of criticizable validity claims expands, while the scope of prescribed, incontestable agreement shrinks – and the "more frequently we can expect rational action orientations."[487]

As in "Historical Materialism and the Development of Normative Structures," religious-metaphysical worldviews represent an advance over myth inasmuch as their first principles, which are themselves incontestable, form the basis of criticism and argument, opening a larger space for communication and intersubjective understanding. Unlike in much of his prior work, however, Habermas in *TCA* connects this reserve of uncriticizable first principles to the vestiges of the mythological worldview – within these foundational notions (e.g., "God," "nature," "being," etc.), the world-concepts that are otherwise differentiated are "fused," along with the corresponding descriptive, normative, and expressive validity claims.[488] In this fusion and the consequent removal of these first principles from argumentation, "there lives on something of mythical thought."[489]

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[487] Ibid., pp. 50–71

[488] It is, indeed, precisely this fusion that permits these foundational notions to serve as first principles of criticism and claims-making in each of the differentiated worlds.

[489] Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 1*, pp. 196–201, 214–215. Weber's Protestant ethic constitutes one-half of this movement – the application of asceticism and the "maxims of the ethic of conviction" to "extrareligious departments of life" – while the development of experimental natural science, which rejoins theory and experience, constitutes the other.

Whereas the discussion of religion in Volume 1 closes with a connection between myth and religion, Volume 2 picks up the connection between religion and the modern worldview, primarily through Habermas' account of what he calls "the linguistification of the sacred."[490] Drawing on the work of Durkheim and George Herbert Mead,[491] Habermas traces the emergence of the possibility of rational action orientations through a "communicatively achieved, reasonable consensus." At the "zero point" of a primitive society, social integration is achieved entirely through ritual practice grounded in the sacred rather than through communication – religion and its communicative structures exist merely to interpret and channel this ritually achieved value consensus into "situations of action" rather than to challenge or generate values itself. Language therefore possesses "only minimal significance" within such a community, with communicative understanding being "tightly restricted to an instrumental role." However, this linguistic mediation of ritual and action already contains the root of religion's demystification: The creation of religious "concepts of the holy" both joins individuals together into a social whole and separates the sacred from the profane domains – inasmuch as sacred ritual can "branch out" into "norms specific to situations and to tasks only by virtue of linguistic mediation," there emerges a definite split between "symbolically mediated and normatively guided interaction." This forces religion into a dual transformation: On the one hand, it becomes a "cultural tradition in need of being communicatively continued" by storing in propositional form the

[490] Habermas describes this account as a "thought experiment" and cautions against taking it as an "introduction to a philosophy of history" – nonetheless, he clarifies, it can be treated as a kind of ideal type for modern worldviews that can reveal "more glaringly the rather ambiguous developmental tendencies in modern societies." Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 2*, pp. 80–81, 106–107

[491] Lesch argues that Walter Benjamin serves as an unacknowledged but equally important third interlocutor in this account. See: Charles H. T. Lesch, "Democratic Solidarity in a Secular Age? Habermas and the 'Linguistification of the Sacred,'" *The Journal of Politics* 81, no. 3 (2019): 862–77, pp. 870–874

"normative and expressive contents of experience" within the symbolically mediated domain of ritual. On the other hand, religion becomes a worldview by connecting this sacred knowledge to profane knowledge from "the domains of instrumental action and social cooperation." As "everyday communicative practice is given its proper weight," the task of connecting sacred and profane increasingly stresses the integrity of the worldview. At the same time, the linguistic translation of ritual into cultural tradition means that social solidarity and the "validity basis of tradition" are now located in communicative action rather than ritual action. The "spellbinding power…of the holy" loses its legitimating function and is replaced by a communicatively achieved consensus. A "communicatively aflow" universal morality "can replace the authority of the sacred" by making explicit what had always been implicit in the unities of ritual and religion: the "general interest" or "common will" of the community. No longer secured by sacred foundations, this general interest can be ascertained only through a reasonable consensus created (rather than merely reproduced) within discourse.[492]

From 1968's "Technology and Science as 'Ideology'" through TCA, Habermas' approach to religion remains within a functionalist framework that understands it through its roles – primarily, the legitimation of power, but also the generation of social cohesion and related tasks – and assigns it a developmental position between the total closure and incontestability of myth and the greater openness of modernity. In the transition to his post-metaphysical period, however, much of this framework changed. Religion as a developmental stage largely disappeared, as did its legitimating and

[492] Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 2*, pp. 60–61, 77–96, 107–111

cohesive functions – what replaced these, however, was not a turn away from functionalism in general, but rather a rearticulation of religion's functions.

3. Religion and Postmetaphysical Thinking

What defines Habermas' work on religion after TCA but before his postsecular turn is above all an increasing attentiveness to the Judeo-Christian background of modern Western philosophies and worldviews – now considered not as a dissolved core of sacred binding power, but in terms of substantive influences and translations of the content of the former on/into the latter. Three trends in Habermas' thinking helped to foreground this question of religion – one that provided, for lack of a better term, the *motivation* for Habermas to look to religion, and two others that enabled religion to break out of its position as an intermediate developmental stage in his work and become relevant and efficacious in the modern age.[493]

First, as Mendieta notes, Habermas increasingly turned his discourse ethics towards moral philosophy after TCA – for example, in his attempt to "render a linguistified version of Kantian deontology" in the form of the "principle of universalization (U)" and the "principle of discourse ethics (D)."[494] Given the close link established above all in TCA between morality and religion, a focus

[493] Matt Sheedy has suggested an alternate account of this transition, arguing that Habermas' turn towards religion in the 1990s was due to two factors: First, the uptake of his thought by theologians and Habermas' own willingness to engage with them (as in his 1988 debate with theologians at the University of Chicago, which resulted in his essay "Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in this World"); second, Habermas' turn towards discourse ethics introduced the possibility of religious citizens as partners in moral and political debate. See: Matt Sheedy, "Habermas and Religion."

[494] Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2007), pp. 65–66; Eduardo Mendieta, "Religion in Habermas"s Work," in *Habermas and Religion*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Eduardo Mendieta, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2013), 391–407.

on the former eventually made a problem of the latter. Nevertheless, even in those sections dedicated to morality in TCA, the treatment of religion remains trapped in roughly the same phylogenetic model that appeared in Habermas' earlier works, with its substance and strength having been sublimated or dissolved within rational morality.

Two dynamics were arguably central in releasing religion from its status as a developmental stepping stone destined to be superceded: First, the formulation of Habermas' idea of post-metaphysical thinking;[495] and second, Habermas' growing interest in global and pluralistic politics.[496] Habermas' elaboration of post-metaphysical thinking itself had two implications for his approach to religion. First, in emphasizing the thoroughly situated and "detrancendentalized" nature of reason,[497] Habermas simultaneously advanced the question of the content of this background of reason – the answer to which in the context of Europe was frequently to be found in Judeo-Christian religion. Second, in framing postmetaphysical thinking not just as a valid method for modern philosophy but as an inescapable condition thereof, Habermas opens a space in his work for the coexistence of religion and philosophy, or even for the content of religious ideas to be incorporated into philosophy, without threatening the integrity and autonomy of the philosophical enterprise itself. Collectively, these shifts signal a pivot in Habermas' engagement with religion – away from developmental narratives and towards a recognition of the continuity of religion in the present. While the function of power

[495] I will be focusing in this section on a few select aspects of post-metaphysical thinking. For a good overview of the concept as a whole, see: Melissa Yates, "Postmetaphysical Thinking," in *Jürgen Habermas: Key Concepts*, ed. Barbara Fultner (New York: Routledge, 2011), 35–53.

[496] See, for example, the essays published in Habermas' 1998 collection: Jürgen Habermas, *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays*, ed. and trans. Max Pensky (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001).

[497] Jürgen Habermas, "Themes in Postmetaphysical Thinking," in *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, trans. William Mark Hohengarten (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), especially pp. 39–44

legitimation fades with this pivot, religion is assigned new functions in relation not to past societies, but to modern philosophy and politics.

Methodologically, philosophical metaphysical thinking in its retreat from the world to a place of detached, universal observation resonates with the ascetic path to religious salvation:

> Each of the great world religions stakes out a privileged and particularly demanding path to the attainment of individual salvation – e.g., the way to salvation of the wandering Buddhist monk or that of the Christian eremite. Philosophy recommends as its path to salvation the life dedicated to contemplation – the *bios theoretikos*...Theory [within metaphysical thinking] demands a renunciation of the natural attitude toward the world and promises contact with the extra-ordinary.[498]

Post-metaphysical thinking departs from this religiously inflected methodology by recognizing the importance of the (ordinary) world and a speaker's or thinker's place within it. In its rejection of the extraordinary, however, postmetaphysical philosophy has created for itself a "curious dependence." Inasmuch as human life remains subject to "the shattering and subversive intrusion of extraordinary events," religion, as that which "normaliz[es] intercourse with the extraordinary," remains both indispensable and irreplaceable: Philosophy cannot replace religion "as long as religious language is the bearer of a semantic content that is inspiring and even indispensable, for this content eludes...the explanatory force of philosophical language and continues to resist translation into reasoning discourses."[499] Rather than being wholly superseded, religion continues to occupy a key functional role.

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[498] Ibid., p. 32–33

[499] Ibid., p. 51. Habermas again makes a similar point in a separate essay within the same volume: "[Communicative reason] neither announces the absence of consolation in a world forsaken by God, nor does it take it upon itself to provide any consolation. It does without exclusivity as well. As long as no better words for what religion can say are found in the medium of rational discourse, it will even coexist abstemiously with the former, neither

These separate, dual roles of religion and philosophy also seem to be what Habermas has in mind in his 1991 essay on Max Horkheimer's so-called "religious turn." Contra Horkheimer, Habermas affirms that unconditional meaning can exist outside religion, with this unconditionality grounded in a hypothetical "unlimited communication community" consisting of all relevant voices who, in theory, could be convinced of a claim. However, this communicative unconditionality fundamentally differs from transcendental unconditionality: It cannot "provide a substitute for the consolation whereby religion invests unavoidable suffering and unrecompensed injustice, the contingencies of need, loneliness, sickness, and death, with new significance and teaches us to bear them." Therefore, while philosophy, contra Horkheimer, need not be "indifferent" to questions of morality, it also cannot occupy the function of providing comfort in the face what Habermas in *Postmetaphysical Thinking* called "extraordinary events" – and, importantly, nor can it provide motivation to follow its own "moral insights." On these two counts of consolation and motivation, religion may still play a separate but supportive role in a postmetaphysical world.[500]

In addition to religion and philosophy serving separate but equally indispensable functions, Habermas in this period also becomes more open to the presence of secularized religious concepts and claims within philosophy and politics. The 1992 piece "Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in This World," as a sign of things to come, represents one of Habermas' first attempts to engage with theology in its substance and theologians as interlocutors – albeit, as Habermas notes in his opening

supporting it nor combatting it." See: Jürgen Habermas, "The Unity of Reason in the Diversity of Its Voices," in *Postmetaphysical Thinking:*, trans. William Mark Hohengarten (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 115–48, p. 145

[500] Jürgen Habermas, "To Seek to Salvage an Unconditional Meaning Without God Is a Futile Undertaking: Reflections on a Remark of Max Horkheimer," in *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta, trans. Ciaran P. Cronin (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2002), 95–109.

paragraph, with some lingering reticence.[501] In this essay, Habermas defends an analogue to postmetaphysical thinking: "methodical atheism:" the imperative that "Under the conditions of postmetaphysical thinking, whoever puts forth a truth claim today must…translate experiences that have their home in religious discourse into the language of a scientific expert culture." Methodical atheism is therefore a call for a "demythologiz[ing]…experiment" that removes religious concepts from the limited communicative freedom of religious discourse and articulates and justifies them in a "universe of argumentative discourse that is uncoupled from the event of revelation." This occurred historically in, for example, the Hegelian translation of God into the Absolute and of salvation history into the idealist philosophy of history, as well as in Kant's appropriation of the "essentially practical contents" of Christianity into the "forum of reason." However, methodical atheism for Habermas remains an imperative in the present, as religion may still possess "a language whose semantic potential is not yet exhausted" and which proves "superior in its power to disclose the world and to form identity."[502] The translation of religious contents into secular language is therefore made necessary not just by the demands of methodical atheism, but by the special function religion can play in relation to philosophy.

[501] Jürgen Habermas, "Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in This World," p. 226: "Up until now, I have held back from a discussion with theologians; I would also prefer to continue to remain silent…as I am not really familiar with the theological discussion." Habermas relents, he says, because for one to remain silent in the face of the extensive theological engagements with his work would be to "[clothe] himself or herself in an aura of indeterminate significance and [impose] silence." Habermas' public engagements with theologians would continue following his postsecular turn, most prominently in his debate with Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI), which was published as *Dialectics of Secularization*. On the Habermas-Ratzinger debate, see: Michael Welker, "Habermas and Ratzinger on the Future of Religion," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 63, no. 4 (2010): 456–73.

[502] Ibid., pp. 226–236

These two aspects of Habermas' elaboration of postmetaphysical thinking link with a second trend in his post-TCA writing: the increasing attention paid since the mid-1990s to questions of globalization or global politics and their relationship to his framework of discourse ethics.[503] The implications of this joint postmetaphysical and global outlook manifest in Habermas' 2000 interview with Eduardo Mendieta. Habermas in this series of reflections claims that globalization has forced within every religion a confrontation with the fact of religious pluralism, as well as the existence of secular worldviews that remain skeptical of any religious claim. Modern religion must therefore become either "reflexive" and self-critical through a recognition that it inhabits a discursive space "delimited by secular knowledge" and "shared with other religions" – or else it lapses into fundamentalism: a religious movement that, without the "epistemic innocence" of past religion, recognizes yet rejects the pluralism of faiths. At the same time that religions are made inescapably aware of each other and of secular worldviews, so too has secular philosophy and politics inescapably encountered the continuing presence of religious and metaphysical traditions. According to Habermas, this "intense encounter with 'strong' alternative traditions"is an opportunity to "become more fully aware of one's own roots; in this case, our rootedness in the Judaeo-Christian tradition;" only from this point of reflection on "the particularity of [one's] own...mental presuppositions" can intercultural discourse reveal genuinely common "discursive presuppositions, interpretations, and value orientations."[504]

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[503] On this, see: William F. Scheuerman, "Global Governance without Global Government? Habermas on Postnational Democracy," *Political Theory* 36, no. 1 (2008): 133–51.

[504] In a sense, for Habermas, these alternate traditions must be religious – the political and economic rationalization of the West has expanded globally, such that "We no longer confront other cultures as alien since their structures still remind us of previous phases of our own social development." But "What we *do* encounter as alien within

This newfound spur to self-reflection extends to Habermas' work itself. He distinguishes between two trends in contemporary German thought – one drawing from "athetistic, Platonistic" ontology and cosmology and another that has been "revolutionized by historical thought." The latter includes not only those who, like Hegel, place "basic metaphysical concepts…within the medium of *Heilsgeschichte*," but also those who "transform categories of lived historical experience into basic philosophical concepts – for example, "sociality, language, praxis…intersubjective understanding, individuality, freedom…and so on." It is in this line of thought – "more deeply influenced by 'Jerusalem' than 'Athens'" – that Habermas places himself: He "would not object to the claim that my conception of language and of communicative action…nourishes itself from the legacy of Christianity" through a particular, intersubjective telos and logos "understood as Christian"[505] – so long as this claim of influence recognizes the "methodological difference" between the metaphysical grounding of religious concepts and his postmetaphysical philosophical discourse that "conforms to the demands of justificatory speech" and maintains "methodological atheism" in its engagements with religion. Here we see emphasized the importance for Habermas of the distinction between a methodologically postmetaphysical outlook and an originally metaphysical substantive content – the latter may be

other cultures is the stubborn distinctiveness of their religious cores." See: Jürgen Habermas, "A Conversation About God and the World," p. 156. In other words, Western influence (Habermas explicitly invokes the then-recent end of the Cold War as an indication of the modern inescapability of capitalism) has placed the world on political and economic fixed rails, whereas religious traditions prove more difficult to homogenize – cf. eighteenth-century universal theories of human development (e.g., the "four-stages theory) that present global economic or political structures as converging independent of external (or Western) influence: Ronald L. Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

[505] Habermas even extends this acknowledged inheritance to his earlier work. The concept of "emancipation" in 1968's *Knowledge and Human Interests*, for example, "could be 'unmasked' as the secularizing translation of the divine promise of salvation" – though he notes that he has since "become more cautious" in applying the term "emancipation" to social collectives rather than individuals. See: Ibid., p. 160

appropriated by the former, so long as it is translated into the discourse of "public…reasons," which preserves the "rational core" of the religious concept and opens it to a legitimacy grounded in intersubjective understanding rather than a closed metaphysics. This translation project remains incomplete, as "philosophy has not fully exhausted, has not yet translated" the meaningful and motivational contents of religious speech – but neither can this ongoing project be completed at all: "it would be the worst kind of intellectualism to expect that philosophy's 'way of translation' could completely appropriate the forms of experience preserved in religious language."[506]

These four themes set the stage for Habermas' postsecular work – specifically: (1) The distinction between method or reason-giving (which must remain postmetaphysical and/or methodically atheist) and content (which can be drawn from religious-metaphysical traditions); (2) the continuing function of religion in modern life, which is neither in opposition to nor fully assimilable by secular philosophy; (3) the relation between discourse ethics, religion, and global (and/or pluralist) politics; (4) the Western philosophical-historical coming-to-terms with its Judeo-Christian heritage, which is both motivated and made crucial by encounters with its others. The core difference between this framework and Habermas' postsecular work is that his focus shifts from the relation between religion and secular philosophy in general to the relation between these two specifically as it concerns the modern secular state and religious pluralism. This shift in focus spurred a second shift: towards an embrace of normative functionalism. A key concern for Habermas in the postsecular period is the role that religion should play within democratic politics.

[506] Ibid., pp. 147–150, 155–156, 160–161, 164

4. Postsecularism

This key focus on religion and politics was first signaled in an address Habermas gave on October 14, 2001 on the occasion of receiving the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade. Habermas likely planned the topic of this address to be genetic engineering – a theme that had recently occupied his work[507] – but the events of September 11, 2001 and its immediate aftermath left him "restricted in…choice of a subject." For Habermas, what was striking about these events was not merely that the terrorist attacks were "motivated by religious beliefs," but also that this religious motivation seemed to be mirrored in the American (and, more broadly, Western) response: "the language of retaliation – which the President of the United States was not the only one to resort to in response to the unbelievable – had an Old Testament ring to it." Indeed, Habermas writes, it seemed like "the blind fundamentalist attack had struck a religious chord in the very heart of secular society."[508]

If the attacks of September 11 provided the immediate impetus for Habermas' choice of topic, he also situated it – both in his earliest postsecular works and throughout his subsequent elaborations – within concerns that had occupied him since his initial distinction of system and lifeworld in the 1960s. The expansion of the regulatory functions of markets has created an increasingly depoliticized realm of collective life in which decisions are made via instrumental reason rather than democratic

[507] Less than three months prior, on June 28, 2001, Habermas gave the Christian Wolf Lecture at Marburg University on the topic of genetic engineering, later expanded and published in *The Future of Human Nature*. Habermas suggests that this would have been the topic of his October 14 address as well ("Only the other day, opinions differed about another issue – the question of whether, and how, we should, via genetic engineering, submit to self-instrumentalization"), and he briefly connects his comments on secularization to genetic engineering at the end of the address. See: Jürgen Habermas, "Faith and Knowledge," in *The Future of Human Nature* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2003), 101–15, pp. 101, 113–115

[508] Jürgen Habermas, "Faith and Knowledge," pp. 101–102

politics: "Markets, which cannot be democratized like the administration of a state, are taking over an increasing number of regulatory functions in areas of life that hitherto were held together in a normative manner, that is, by political structures or via pre-political forms of communication."[509] There is thus, on the one hand, the need to "avoid a clash of civilizations" and, on the other, the need to push back against the depoliticizing trend of ever-expanding purposive-rational systems.[510] Habermas' postsecular theory represents his attempt to recognize and leverage the meaning-making power of religion to counteract the expansion of depoliticized decision procedures, as well as put the secular West on better footing vis-à-vis the persistence of religious motivation both within and beyond its borders. And it seeks to accomplish each of these tasks while maintaining the neutrality of the liberal state.

Even in the midst of depoliticization, religion, Habermas claims, maintains a "special power to articulate moral intuitions," particularly in diagnosing social maladies: "lives that have gone astray...societal pathologies...the failure of individuals' plans for their lives, and...the deformation and disfigurement of the lives that people share with each other." Religion therefore provides "key resources for the creation of meaning and identity" that can aid a secular liberal response to these depoliticized marketized regulatory apparatuses.[511] However, "democratic common sense" encourages claims in a pluralistic society to be phrased in language accessible to all, and the neutrality of the secular

[509] Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *Dialectics of Secularization*, pp. 35–36

[510] Ibid., pp. 102–103

[511] Jürgen Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," p. 10; Jürgen Habermas, "Faith and Knowledge," pp. 102–103; Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *Dialectics of Secularization*, pp. 36, 43–44

state with regard to religion requires that religious claims be disallowed within governmental spaces. Religious claims must therefore be "translated" from a language of revealed truth accessible only to a religious community to a secular-reasonable language open to all – a translation that cannot occur in the neutral governmental space, but only in the "pre-parliamentarian domain, i.e. in the political public sphere itself." This requires effort and a "learning process" on the part of both religious and secular citizens – the former must acknowledge the plurality of incommensurable worldviews[512] and the neutrality of the secular state, while the latter must acknowledge that religious claims "have the potential to express truth," allow such claims into the public sphere, and help translate the "truth content" of these claims into secular terms so that they can be permitted past the secular "filter" of governmental institutions.[513]

Habermas is careful to emphasize that he is not interested in the truth (or falsity) of purely religious "truths," i.e. propositional statements of faith or belief, on which he claims neutrality.[514] Instead, he has in mind truths claims that are not religious per se – in other words, not claims referring to the existence of a deity, and certainly not claims that are provable or disprovable via the natural

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[512] What Habermas seems to have in mind here is not a full-blown relativism, but rather what he elsewhere calls "tolerance." This kind of tolerance does not involve accepting the truth claims of other religious communities, nor forsaking one's own, but rather recognizing that other views reflect a legitimate or valid difference that should not be coercively impinged: "someone who is tolerant may, on the one hand, realize his own ethos only within the limits of what everyone is equally entitled to; on the other hand, he must also respect the ethos of others within these limits. It is not the rejected views and the competing validity claims that must be accepted. The individual's own truth claims and certainties remain undisturbed. The burden does not follow from the need to relativize one's own convictions but from the demand to restrict their practical efficacy." See: Jürgen Habermas, "Religious Tolerance as Pacemaker for Cultural Rights," in *Between Naturalism and Religion*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Malden: Polity Press, 2008), 251–70; quote from p. 261

[513] Jürgen Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," pp. 9–10; Jürgen Habermas, "Faith and Knowledge," pp. 108–109; Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *Dialectics of Secularization*, pp. 48–52; Jürgen Habermas, *Europe: The Faltering Project* (Cambridge UK: Polity, 2009), pp. 59–77

[514] e.g., Jürgen Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," p. 16

sciences, but rather "normative" truths pertaining to what is proper to humans as such, their interpersonal orientations, ethical values, and so on. Such normative truths may initially be expressed and justified in ways that presuppose the absolute validity of specifically religious claims (e.g., the infallibility of a religious text or the existence of a divinely ordered human world), but may nonetheless contain "profane truth claims" that can be "set free" from these religious justifications by being translated into secular language and grounded in secular, universally accessible reasons, thereby opening them to intersubjective justification.[515]

This program of translation Habermas advocates in a postsecular context characterizes much of European political philosophical history, with concepts such as "autonomy," "individuality," "emancipation," and "solidarity" bearing distinct Judeo-Christian origins and meanings, and ideas like Kant's categorical imperative and "the dignity of all men" secularizing "the authority of divine commands" and the notion of "man in the image of God."[516] The transition from *Imago Dei* to universal human dignity is not a mere terminological difference. Rather, it reflects a shift in grounding from religious to secular reasons, and hence also a shift in the discourses in which these terms may be used: once limited strictly to religiously inflected discourse, the terms may now be taken up in an increasingly rationalized context in which the exclusive authority of religion has evaporated.

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[515] Jürgen Habermas, "Introduction," in *Between Naturalism and Religion*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Malden: Polity Press, 2008), 1–7, p. 6

[516] Contending with the religious inheritance of secular modernity or modern philosophy is key to many postsecular theorists – and a postsecular framing is common among those who write on the influence of religion on philosophy. See, for example: Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008); Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Simon Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology*.

These claims of secularization-as-translation serve a dual purpose in Habermas' writings, one oriented to the domestic functioning of liberal democracies encompassing an increasingly pluralistic and persistently religious citizenry, and another that has in mind much broader intercultural, even intercivilizational, implications. With respect to the former, the history of secularization-as-translation provides both a positive example and justification of permitting religious claims within the public sphere. While Habermas frames this inclusion of religious claims as stemming foremost from the liberal democratic demand that all citizens be able to view themselves as the authors of their laws,[517] the origin of key ethical and political terms in the extraction of profane truths from religious claims emphasizes the "semantic potential" of such secularizations – allowing religious claims in the public sphere thus not only meets the obligations of a liberal politics to religious citizens, but also has the potential to enrich the moral and political reasoning of all citizens. Secular citizens must be convinced of this potential value of religion, but a "genealogical awareness of the religious origins of the morality of equal respect for everybody is useful in this context."[518]

However, Habermas is concerned not only with the functioning of liberal democracies in the West, but also the image that the West projects to the rest of the world. The twin processes of modernization and secularization that occurred gradually in the West have become "accelerated" and "radically uprooting" in other contexts, creating a "time-lag" between culture and society: "What in

[517] "Even if the religious language is the only one [religious citizens] can speak in public, and if religiously justified opinions are the only ones they can or wish to put into political controversies, they nevertheless understand themselves as members of a civitas terrena, which empowers them to be the authors of laws to which as its addressees they are subject." In this way, even given the institutional translation proviso, religious citizens may still "grasp themselves as participants in the legislative process, although only secular reasons count therein." See: Jürgen Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," p. 10

[518] Jürgen Habermas, "The Political," p. 27

our countries, under more propitious conditions, could after all be experienced as a process of *creative* destruction was, there, not bound up with the promise of compensation for the pain suffered through the disintegration of traditional forms of life." What terrorism reflects is therefore a "fatally speechless clash of worlds" between a religious culture and a rapidly modernizing and rationalizing society – with the West perceived as drivers of the latter, as "salespeople of instrumental reason and destructive secularization." Habermas hopes that reflecting on Europe's own (still-unfinished) history of secularization-as-translation will provide a "common language" across cultures and project a different image of the modernizing and secularizing West, enabling peaceful engagement via discourse rather than succumbing to the "mute violence" of military conflict:

> "Those moral feelings which only religious language has as yet been able to give a sufficiently differentiated expression may find universal resonance once a salvaging formulation turns up for something almost forgotten, but implicitly missed. The mode for nondestructive secularization is translation. This is what the Western world, as the worldwide secularizing force, may learn from its own history. If it presents this complex image of itself to other cultures in a credible way, intercultural relations may find a language other than that of the military and the market alone."[519]

4.1 The Substance of Secularism

Habermas' postsecularism, then, seeks to carefully manage religion, leveraging its meaning-making capacity while ensuring that it does not threaten the secularity of the political sphere. This secularity is framed as a procedural principle: Only those reasons that are accessible to all are permitted within the political-institutional sphere. Under closer scrutiny of Habermas' theory of translation, however, this procedural account of secularity quickly falls apart.

[519] Jürgen Habermas, "Faith and Knowledge," pp. 102–103, 110–111, 114–115

Habermas in his postsecular work wants to include religious claims within public discourse while also maintaining the secularity of the political sphere. This requires two moves that are analytically distinct yet run together in his work. First, religion must be conceptually separated from politics – elsewise, how is the political exclusion of religious claims-making to be even articulated? Second, he must justify this exclusion of religious claims within the political space on the basis of some fundamental distinction between the two. Given Habermas' functionalist framework, these distinctions must be articulated in terms of the functions of religion: First, religion retains a "special power" to provide meaning and articulate diagnoses of social and individual ills against an increasingly rationalized world. Second, religious claims are accessible only to those who share their system of belief rather than to all potential interlocutors. The first distinction concerns the special function of religion, while the second concerns *how* religion functions. Let us for now focus on the second claim.

As Cooke points out, Habermas identifies the idea of universally accessible reasons with "secular reasons" – i.e. secular validity claims are accessible to all citizens, whereas religious claims are accessible only to the members of a particular community of believers.[520] At the same time, however, Habermas frames the importance of secular citizens engaging in processes of translation not just as an attempt to relieve an "asymmetrical burden" from religious citizens, but also as a response to the fact that some religious citizens are "mono-glot" and are only able to "field religious reasons." If such citizens have trust in their secular fellow-citizens to translate their religious claims into secular terms,

[520] Maeve Cooke, "A Secular State for a Postsecular Society? Postmetaphysical Political Theory and the Place of Religion," *Constellations* 14, no. 2 (2007): 224–38, p. 230

they may still be able to "grasp themselves as participants in the legislative process."[521] However, why should we expect that these mono-glot religious citizens unable to field secular reasons should find such secular reasons to be "accessible," much less "acceptable?" The principle of universal accessibility runs aground precisely on the inclusion of religious traditions into the public political sphere. Conversely, not all secular citizens are mono-glot – in the sense of being able to "access" only irreligious reasons – because at least some of them are able to participate in the translation process and therefore access religious reason-giving. The distinction between a set of reasons that are universally accessible and those that are accessible only to a subset of a community dissolves here – and with it partially dissolves the hard distinction between the religious and the secular.

If we jettison the distinction based on universal accessibility, the only one that remains between the religious and the secular, then, lies in the description of their functions: religion retains a "special power" to articulate meanings, intuitions, etc. However, with only this narrow distinction in mind, there is little reason to exclude religious discourse from politics proper. Indeed, precisely the opposite conclusion might be warranted: If religion is to play such a crucial role within modern politics, why should it not be permitted to speak in its own voice? Going a bit further, we might even inquire as to whether we can distinguish secular and religious reasons at all within Habermas' framework. If the cognitive content of religious statements can be translated into secular terms, and if each is only accessible to a subset of a society, then all that remains to distinguish the two are

[521] Jürgen Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," p. 10

epiphenomenal characteristics (e.g., an appeal to a religious text vs. a moral-philosophical text) that seem to be of little concern in Habermas' work.

Habermas' procedural justification of the secularity of politics – ensuring that deliberations are universally accessible – therefore falls apart in the face of public (and pluralistic) religion. Secularism then becomes not a neutral procedural principle, but a substantive one – as the core political good, it is in relation to the secularity of the political sphere that the value and threat of religion are assessed. This newly substantive form of secularism comes through in two ways: First, in the normative demands that it makes on religion, which largely reproduce Habermas' prior descriptive account of modernization; second, in the alteration Habermas makes to his conception of modern discourse as fundamentally open and possessing no values that are not contestable and have not been generated within discourse itself.

In Habermas' postsecular work, the developmental account of the decline of religion that appears, for example, in *TCA* and *Legitimation Crisis* does not disappear, but rather is shifted from a descriptive account to a normative imperative. Consider the "learning process" that religions must undergo in the postsecular age in order to participate in democratic deliberation. First, they must recognize the plurality of worldviews and become "self-reflexive," relating "their religious beliefs to the statements of competing doctrines of salvation."[522] Second, they must "conceive the relationship of

[522] Habermas' apparent conflation here of religions with "doctrines of salvation" reflects what Maria Birnbaum describes as his "tilt towards a particular type of the so-called 'world religions'" in his thinking about religion – particularly Christianity and Judaism as already part of the story of Western reason and philosophy and Islam as the upstart challenger. See: Maria Birnbaum, "Exclusive Pluralism: The Problem of Habermas' Postsecular Argument and the 'Making of' Religion," in *Religion as a Category of Governance and Sovereignty*, ed. Trevor Stack, Naomi R. Goldenberg, and Timothy Fitzgerald (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 182–96, p. 191

dogmatic and secular beliefs in such a way that the autonomous progress in secular knowledge cannot come to contradict their faith – i.e. they must relinquish claims to objectivating truths that are provable or disprovable by the natural sciences, as the Catholic Church did with respect to the heliocentric model of the solar system or evolutionary theory. Third, they must embrace the "individualism and universalism of modern law and morality."[523] Now consider some key elements of Habermas' descriptive account of the modernization of religious worldviews in *Legitimation Crisis*: This involves "the draining of cognitive contents from world-views," a shift from "tribal particularism to universalistic and at the same time individualistic orientations," and "increasing reflexivity in the mode of belief," in the sense that claims are not "taken for granted" but rather are "rendered problematic."[524] Faced with the apparent failure of secularization as a descriptive developmental account, Habermas instead turns it into a normative imperative.

However, this movement from a descriptive to a normative functionalism requires a partial closure of the openness of discourse. The unquestionable "first principles" of religious worldviews that prevented the full freedom of discourse are here transformed into the unquestionability of secular reason. This is justified on the basis of the supposed universal accessibility of secular reason – i.e. on its neutrality – but, as we have seen, this claim is dubious at best. Without this justification, the demand that all public discourse be in reference to secular reason becomes just another illegitimate constriction on communication. Habermas simultaneously demands the modernization of religion and the regression of modern discourse to what is, on his own account, a metaphysically inflected partial

[523] Jürgen Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," p. 14

[524] Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, pp. 11–12, 15

freedom of communication wherein first principles are wholly removed from argumentation – in other words, secular discourse adopts the same partial openness of communication with which Habermas in his earlier work characterizes religion.

Habermas attempts to frame secularism as a procedural principle: as the requirement that contributions to political discourse use universally accessible reasons. However, when this procedural justification fails, Habermas is forced to choose between two fundamental commitments: He can either affirm the value of secularism or defend the openness and generativity of discourse. He opts for the former, making of secularism not a neutral procedural principle, but a substantive and unchallengeable normative core that serves as the key reference point in managing public religious claims. Without this normative core, a totally open political sphere – constricting neither secular nor religious claims – would possess no principle by which to block the "inherent potential for violence" and intolerance present in religion.[525]

Finally, while Habermas' postsecular functionalism is necessarily corrosive of the distinction between the religious and the secular, it is also necessarily reductive of religion itself. That is, by focusing specifically and solely on the role religion plays in relation to politics or society, Habermas excludes much if not all of what a religious individual would consider important to their faith (e.g., doctrine, religious experience, connection to the divine, etc.). From a sociological or historical perspective, this is largely unproblematic – if a given society or political order is one's object of study, it is sensible to focus on the relation of religion to this object. However, within Habermas' postsecular

[525] Jürgen Habermas, *Europe*, pp. 61–62

framework, functionalism must perform a second duty: it must serve as an invitation to religious citizens to participate in the public sphere. In this context, an invitation that promises only partial recognition or misrecognition to religious citizens – or promises to take seriously only those beliefs that may prove useful and plausible to secular society – is unlikely to meet with a positive reception; indeed, many of the criticisms of Habermas from those more favorable towards religion focus precisely on the exclusion of the emotional, experiential, or otherwise non-rational(izable) aspects of religious life.[526] Habermas himself notes that even with the long European history of translating religious ideas into secular language, "within the Churches, a certain resentment has persisted…toward the secular state."[527] Habermas hopes that secular citizens sharing the burden of translation with religious citizens – his attempted solution to the problem of placing an "asymmetric burden" on the latter – will relieve this resentment in the future, but this ignores the fact that many of those whom Habermas claims contributed to this translation effort (e.g., Marx) were themselves not particularly religious.

Habermas' postsecular functionalism therefore fails on two counts: First, due to its reductiveness, it is unable to adequately incorporate religious perspectives into the public sphere of discourse; second, because of its tendency to blur distinctions between religion and non-religion, it is unable to adequately defend the secularity of the political sphere. These same characteristics may make it appropriate for studies of religion in various contexts, or for structuring an account of the supplanting of religion by secular functional analogues, but faced with the multiple demands of the

[526] For example, see: Michele Dillon, "Jürgen Habermas and the Postsecular Appropriation of Religion: A Sociological Critique," in *The Postsecular in Question: Religion in Contemporary Society*, ed. Philip S. Gorski (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

[527] Jürgen Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," p. 13

type of postsecularism advocated by Habermas – wherein religion must be simultaneously included and excluded – a functional approach is bound to flounder on the very simplicity that makes it appealing in the first place.

And yet, it is difficult to see how religion, once its public presence can no longer be denied, could be managed otherwise within a secular context. In his earlier work, Habermas' secularism could be largely unproblematic – religion, per his phylogenetic account, had already vanished from the public sphere and been relegated to the private. Secularism could therefore be a simple neutrality vis-à-vis private religion, as the secularity of the public sphere was an established fact. In his postsecularism, however, Habermas recognizes that the public inefficacy of religion is neither an established fact, nor is desirable. His secularism therefore became active and substantive, staking a claim to the value of the secular state and managing the public presence of religion to maximize its goods provided and minimize its threats posed to this normative core. In Habermas' work, secularism as neutrality collapses the moment that religion appears as a politically efficacious force. What emerges instead is secularism as a claim to the proper order of human affairs: in other words, secularism as a framework of political meaning – one that, for Habermas, cannot afford to be neural with respect to alternate meaningful frameworks.

5. Conclusion

Schmitt claimed that substantive meaning was crucial to the stability of states and their ability to act in the world, but this meaning for him must always be unified: He viewed a plurality of "constructs of meaning" within a single state as inherently destabilizing – a powder keg of violence and civil conflict waiting to be ignited. Habermas eventually came to partially accept each of these claims

in different ways: Meaning-making, he admits in his postsecular work, is necessary for a state to be genuinely *political* rather than submit to rational-purposive regulatory systems. However, a plurality of meaningful frameworks in politics necessarily threatens the cohesion of the political community, inhibiting the universal accessibility of reasons and hence eroding political legitimacy. Schmitt's solution of decisionistically unifying the community, not least through the elimination of aberrant systems of meaning through their designation as "domestic enemies," is anathema to Habermas.

In his alternative solution, however, Habermas is himself forced to establish a substantive good that lies beyond communicative argumentation: a political sphere that accepts only secular reasons. In the process, politics ceases to be wholly procedural and grounded in intersubjective legitimation – this secular politics acquires its own meaningful substance: the unquestionable rectitude of a political-institutional sphere devoid of religion. Without this foundational substance, there would exist no principle by which to manage the political presence of religious meaning. Habermas' postsecularism ultimately leads him, even if implicitly, back to Schmitt: "life struggles not with death, spirit not with spiritlessness; spirit struggles with spirit, life with life."[528] For Habermas, the regulation of meaning requires a meaningful framework – an account of the proper order of human affairs. This is so even if, in his own theorization, a firm defense of this foundational order proves elusive. Secularism as genuine neutrality can, it seems, only be practiced in a world without religion: a world in which secularism itself becomes trivial.

[528] Carl Schmitt, *The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations*, p. 96

Conclusion: Meaning and Politics

In September of 2024, Francis Ford Coppola released *Megalopolis*, his 138-minute "magnum opus" based (very loosely) on the abortive first-century Catilinarian conspiracy in Ancient Rome. Set in the state of New Rome, a reimagining of twenty-first century New York City, the story introduces us to a power struggle between Giancarlo Esposito's "Cicero," the pragmatic and technocratic mayor, Adam Driver's "Cesar," a utopian visionary, and "Clodio," a billionaire-turned-populist-turned-fascist portrayed with unfortunate abandon by Shia LaBeouf, whose followers wave Confederate flags and hoist signs reading "MAKE ROME GREAT AGAIN." Subtle, the film is not. While *Megalopolis* is, in large part, a thematically and narratively incoherent mish-mash of historical allusions, anachronistic symbolic languages, and nonsequitous dialogue, it also represents the culmination of the life's work of an *auteur* who was born during World War II, lived through the entirety of the ideologically charged Cold War, and seems now to have turned his attention to the threat of right-wing reactionism. Through this two-hour gish-gallop of half-formed ideas, one message comes through with relative clarity: A stable politics requires not technocratic tinkering à la Cicero, but a bold, shared ideal – a common purpose, goal, and meaning to unite the (Megalo)polis.

Indeed, the notion that any form of politics necessarily requires a meaningful substance bears a long and illustrious genealogy in political thought. Aristotle himself begins the first Book of his *Politics* by defining a political entity as one irreducibly concerned with meaning: "Every state is a community of some kind, and every community is established with a view to some good," with the highest

community of the state aiming "at good in a greater degree than any other."[529] Those who adopt the position of liberal exceptionalism described in the introduction – the notion that liberalism is uniquely troubled by questions of substantive meaning due to its inherently meaningless politics – land in an ambiguous position with regard to this claim. They argue, implicitly or explicitly, that liberalism, in spite of its continuity over centuries, is (or at least appears to be) meaningless in itself, *and* that this meaninglessness renders it particularly unstable and unable to respond to irruptions of meaningful politics that threaten its order.

This dissertation has argued that we must think about the problem of meaning and politics beyond liberal exceptionalism: The writers addressed in this dissertation demonstrate that concerns around meaning persist, indeed, are perhaps heightened, within non-liberal accounts of politics. As we saw in Chapter 1, Carl Schmitt – who, among the writers addressed in this dissertation, offers the hardest alternative to liberalism, and most juxtaposes the meaningfulness of genuine politics with the empty technocratic and procedural character of liberalism – recognized that that an explicitly substantive and meaningful politics would itself still face crises of meaning. There is, according to Schmitt, no guarantee that alternative frameworks of meaning will not spontaneously emerge "from the masses themselves" and threaten the state's internal unity and capacity for collective action,[530] regardless of political form and regardless of the substantive meaning with which this political form is imbued (e.g., on the basis of nation, class, religion, etc.). Schmitt concludes from this that politics

[529] Aristotle, *The Politics and the Constitution of Athens*, ed. Stephen Everson, trans. Jonathan Barnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 11

[530] Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, p. 71

comprises the constant management of these meaningful frameworks, with the sovereign adjusting the political form to maintain legitimacy, inculcating existential identity and value, and, sometimes, exterminating competing frameworks of meaning before they jeopardize the internal cohesion of the political community – politics is, for Schmitt, a constant negotiation between the normatively unconstrained power of the sovereign and the social fact of mass structures of meaning without which the sovereign would have no legitimacy nor capacity to act.

Karl Löwith, in his early critique of *The Concept of the Political*, viewed with horror Schmitt's cynical and occasionalist conception of politics as the management of meaning. In Chapter 2, I argued that Löwith's engagements with Schmitt, as the foremost intellectual representative of rising fascism, woke him from his self-acknowledged political quietude and led him to develop an integrated theory of the cultural and intellectual conditions of twentieth-century fascism. On Löwith's pessimistic account, a set of historical factors, most crucially, the rise of the natural sciences in the seventeenth century, have irreversibly structured the conditions of meaning-making and politics in the twentieth century and made a condition of existential homelessness both universal and inescapable. When combined with ideas of a potentially infinite progress (in morals, technology, etc.), this lack of existential grounding – a lack of any firm, given meaning, values, or role in the world – can tip into a nihilistic apprehension of endless decadence as an inverted form of progress narratives. From here, it is not far to the "active nihilism" of Nietzsche and, more importantly for Löwith, Schmitt: a nihilism that does not passively despair over the existential groundlessness and decadence of existing society, but seeks to decisionistically fabricate a new, unchallengeable existential meaning of life and politics. Having been introduced to the problem of meaning in politics through his own early critique of

Schmitt's decisionism, Löwith ultimately concluded that Schmitt and German fascism were not isolated aberrations, but rather rooted in the inescapable existential conditions of twentieth-century politics. Rejecting as hopeless the notion that one could ever "return" to the "orderly cosmos" of Ancient Greek philosophy or early Christian thought, Löwith saw no way out of the crisis of meaning and turned instead to a "skeptical" humility and retreat from the grand, though empty, promises of politics. In other words, for Löwith, the problem of meaning in politics was an insoluble one rooted in already-concluded historical processes – crises of meaninglessness, rather than being limited to liberalism, affect all action and thought in the twentieth century and grant the politics of that century its particularly brutal character.

While accepting substantial aspects of this historical account, Eric Voegelin rejected Löwith's skepticism and fatalism. In Chapter 3, I traced how Voegelin's engagements with what he called "modern psychology," particularly mass psychology à la Gustave Le Bon, conditioned his more optimistic account of the problem of meaning in politics. While in his early work on national psychology (particularly in the American context) Voegelin made liberal use of the insights of mass psychology, his attitude towards the metaphysical assumptions of the field quickly became more critical, leading him to incorporate the empirical observations of mass psychology into his own metaphysical framework. Voegelin argued that modern psychology effaced the fundamental and universal existential condition of human life: its "In-Betweenness," its existence between transcendent and immanent poles. Neglecting the, for Voegelin, reality that humans naturally understand themselves as neither purely material (like animal or plant life) nor as purely spiritual (like transcendent deities), modern psychology is unable to either recognize or contend with the true pathology

structuring twentieth-century politics – a pathology not of the mind (psychopathology), but of the spirit (pneumopathology). This pneumopathology consists in the rejection or non-recognition of the In-Betweenness of human existence, which, in the political sphere, results in mass movements positing the ultimate end, goal, and meaning of human existence in reference to some mundane substance (e.g., the nation) or theorized ideal end of history. Despite the prevalence of this pneumopathological orientation in the twentieth century, however, Voegelin claims that a healthy pneumatic orientation always remains a live possibility – and so too does non-pathological meaning-making that locates the ground of existence in transcendence and organizes the political community on the basis of this absolute, non-instrumental meaning. For Voegelin, then, substantive conceptions of meaning are crucial to forming a unified political entity out of a group of individuals; but even in such a healthy political community, disaster and upheaval (natural or otherwise) will return individuals to the "search for the ground," generating a "new center," a new conception of collective meaning, that will "cause a crisis of public order inasmuch as it engenders a conflict between two orders with rival claims to loyalty."[531] Voegelin therefore argues that crises of meaning are innate to any politics – the essence of humans as meaning-making beings, as well as the historically and culturally conditioned nature of any substantive framework of meaning, necessitates that even pneumatically healthy communities will frequently find themselves challenged by alternate articulations of a meaningful politics that competes for adherents.

[531] Eric Voegelin, "What Is History?," p. 48

Schmitt, Löwith, and Voegelin, each of them non-liberal (despite their substantial differences), are joined in their common claim that meaning is, for better or worse, central to politics, and that any political community of any form will find itself susceptible to irruptions of meaningful politics that threaten the stability or moral sanity of the state. While their responses differ, each recognizes that the problem of meaning in politics is an insoluble one – even a state grounded in a shared substantive conception of the right and the good, the proper order of human affairs, and so on will continually face the potential threat of crises of meaning.

Jürgen Habermas, who, alongside Rawls, stands as the most influential liberal theorist of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, came to the problem of meaning in politics relatively late in his career, roughly contemporaneously with his 2001 postsecular turn. As argued in Chapter 4, Habermas came to view religious meaning as an antidote to the increasing dominance of the market and bureaucracy in political life and consequently sought to partially include religious claims in the public sphere. However, this inclusion requires a partial closure of the total openness of discourse he previously placed at the center of his communicative politics – whereas in his prior work, secularism could be assumed as the brute reality of modern politics (due to his phylogenetic account of the decline and privatization of religion), Habermas' recognition of both the continued political efficacy of religion and the necessity of substantive meaning in the public sphere to maintain solidarity and safeguard politics from economic or bureaucratic rationalization required him to shift his secularism from a neutral principle grounded in the presumed decline of religion to an active political principle determining which kinds of meaningful claims are permitted in public and to what extent they are to be permitted. In other words, once Habermas begins to take seriously the political efficacy of

substantive meaning, he is forced as a consequence to recognize the necessity of managing this meaning through some unchallengeable notion of the proper order of human affairs.

The case studies in this dissertation demonstrate that those theorists who have taken seriously the problem of meaning in politics have concurred that, due to its plurality and public efficacy, meaningful conceptions will always be present and operative within political spaces, and that this presence implies the constant threat that such substantive conceptions could challenge the legitimacy or stability of the existing political framework. Rather than being limited only to liberalism, on account of its purported neutrality and meaninglessness, crises of meaning are revealed to be a constitutive part of politics itself – and they are such not least because political solidarity and action are always illuminated and motivated by meaningful conceptions of the form and purpose proper to human affairs.

This recognition of the central importance of meaning to political life, combined with an awareness of the close conceptual connection between religion and meaning-making, pushes us to reconsider how we discuss the relation of religion to politics. In recent years, a number of scholars have suggested that, from a legal-regulatory perspective, treating religion as a coherent and specific category to which certain protections and limitations can be applied is misguided. For example, Cécile Laborde defends the neutrality of the liberal state with respect to incommensurable conceptions of the good – including but not limited to religious doctrines. Continuing this line of thinking, she "disaggregates" religion into its various elements, connecting them to both non-religious analogues and the liberal principles that govern their relationship to politics, arguing that liberal democracies need not single

religion out for special treatment.[532] Winnifred Sullivan, though aligned with the critical scholars of secularism (e.g., Saba Mahmood, Stanley Fish, etc.) whom Laborde seeks to counter, lands on much the same conclusion, arguing through an engagement with *Warner v. Boca Raton* that special protections for religion require the slotting of specific acts or claims into legitimate and illegitimate religious categories, necessitating the exclusion of much that would be described as "religious" by participants and outside observers. Given this, she advocates removing religion as "an object of specific legal protection" and returning questions of religious freedom to questions of "the accommodation of difference generally."[533] From the perspective of International Relations, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd strikes a similar tone, arguing that the privileging of religious freedom within both domestic and international policy-making distorts the category of religion while also naturalizing and reifying one subset of it as both potentially dangerous, violent, and illiberal, and – at the same time – potentially pluralistic, democratic, and modern.[534]

I suggest that we should extend this decentering of the question of religion and politics beyond the legal-regulatory sphere. Indeed, as noted in the introduction, religion is of relevance to politics inasmuch as it contains a meaning-making capacity – an ability to motivate political action by generating conceptions of the good life, the proper order of human affairs, or an apprehension of oneself as part of and contributing to a greater whole. Engaging closely with the writers addressed in this dissertation further emphasizes this centrality of meaning to meditations on religion and politics.

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[532] Cécile Laborde, *Liberalism's Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017).

[533] Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

[534] Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

Secularization is relevant to the German secularization debate inasmuch as, in a Weberian mode, secularization represents the loss of a unified framework of meaning. The claims most associated with the German secularization debate – those regarding the transference of religious notions into secular language – are not primarily claims about the "debt" owed by modernity to theology, but investigations into what becomes of the collective meaning once (on their account) provided by religion in a context of religion's decline and privatization.

This suggests that within political theory, discussions on the relation of religion and politics may in many cases be more fruitfully framed as discussions on the relation of meaning and politics. Such a reframing recognizes that the meaning-making aspects of religion that impinge on politics may be shared by secular ideologies and philosophies. This recognition can provide a buffer between political-theoretical analysis and received notions about religion. As noted by many scholars, the special protections for religion in many liberal democracies are mirrored by a particular aversion to the perceived threats of religion. Heather Rae identifies anxieties over "those perceived to be connected, through religious affiliation or beliefs, with arbitrary or absolute power" as a long-running theme in liberal thought,[535] while Peter Gordon speaks of the "inherited fear of theocratic domination still...at the core of political liberalism."[536] My claim is not that such concerns are always misplaced (indeed, the growing prominence of Catholic Integralism à la Adrian Vermeule suggests that such threats persist in the present day). Rather, my claim is that religion is not unique in its provision of potentially

[535] Heather Rae, "Liberalism and the Anxiety of Belief," *Patterns of Prejudice* 52, no. 4 (2018): 293–313.

[536] Peter E. Gordon, "Introduction: Reflections on the Fiftieth Anniversary of Hans Blumenberg's The Legitimacy of the Modern Age," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 80, no. 1 (2019): 67–74, p. 69

threatening structures of meaning, and that singling it out as a particular object of concern vis-à-vis politics can easily lead to disproportionate fears of religious absolutism, resulting in selective and illegitimate restrictions on free exercise, as well as a belated or blasé reaction to equally exclusionary secular systems of meaning.

Relatedly, this dissertation has shown that those theorists who recognize substantive meaning as central to political life have simultaneously recognized the necessity of managing its appearance. Schmitt, of course, is most explicit on this point and least hesitant to leverage the full power of the state in eliminating aberrant conceptions of meaning within the political community. For Voegelin, the management of meaning is foremost a therapeutic practice that aims at the diagnosis and adjustment of pneumopathological orientations through a genuine philosophy and political science that gets at the "truth of existence" and can thereby serve as a "therapy of order."[537] And even Haebermas, albeit more reluctantly than Schmitt or Voegelin, establishes secularism as an active political principle to manage meaningful public claims once he recognizes the persisting political efficacy of religion.[538]

As discussed in the introduction, liberalism in its classic formulations purports to manage meaning by relegating it in all its forms to the private sphere. However, in recent years, this notion has been challenged not only by liberal theorists like Lefebvre who attempt to recover a substantive, existential meaning to liberalism, but also by critics who have reinterpreted the principle of secularism,

[537] Eric Voegelin, "Science, Politics, and Gnosticism," pp. 13–15

[538] Löwith, as the odd man out here, rejects the management of meaning (à la Schmitt) as a manifestation of the characteristically modern fallacies of nihilism and decisionism; nonetheless, Löwith's pessimism and skepticism stem in part from the plurality and political efficacy of frameworks of meaning – those same traits that make its management necessary in figures like Voegelin and Schmitt.

the cornerstone of liberal neutrality, as a pipeline for covertly smuggling substantive normative conceptions into the regulation of public religion. Indeed, a growing group of scholars have challenged the idea of secularism as a firm separation of state and religion, instead refiguring it as the management and (de)legitimation of religion within the public and political sphere. A key and common claim within this literature is that the "religion" defined by secularism is one centered on privatized belief, propositional doctrine, and individualized relations to the divine. In other words, as Wendy Brown puts it, modern secularism "tacitly universalizes [Protestant] Christianity as the model for religion," with those religions that diverge from this model being considered "improperly tamed" and not subject to the religious freedoms protections accorded to tamed religions.[539]

These critiques suggest that in practice, and for better or worse, liberal states engage in a much more robust management of meaning than implied by the principle of simple neutrality – a claim also supported by the analysis of Habermas' postsecularism in Chapter 4. And, as both that Chapter and the prior discussion of Schmitt's decisionism demonstrate, this form of robust, non-neutral management requires some kind of unchallengeable meaningful substance against which to gauge the threat of alternate meaningful frameworks. What to make, then, of claims of the inherent meaninglessness of liberal politics?

Voegelin and Schmitt each suggest that, because a political order is necessarily defined in existential, meaningful terms, the collapse of that order takes on apocalyptic dimensions: for instance, "when Rome was conquered in 410, a groan went through the *orbis terrarum* that now the end of the

[539] Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom*; Wendy Brown, "Civilizational Delusions: Secularism, Tolerance, Equality," *Theory & Event* 15, no. 2 (2012); Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age*.

world had come."[540] If this is the case, then the heightened existential tenor of hand-wringing in recent years over democratic backsliding and the potential end of liberal democracy writ large certainly indicates that this political form contains, for its proponents, a substantive, meaningful content beyond pragmatic or procedural considerations.[541] Given this, what can explain the apparent eagerness of many political observers, liberals and illiberals alike, to attribute a total abjuration of meaning to liberalism?

The claim to the meaninglessness of liberalism is hardly a new one: While the World-War-II-era writers addressed in this dissertation (Schmitt, Löwith, Voegelin) are each non-liberal, John Gunnell notes that the same concerns around crises of meaning we see today also existed in American liberal political theory both immediately before and after World War II, with theorists of liberalism increasingly concerned that it lacked a substantive "core that could withstand the challenge of antagonistic ideologies."[542] However, some scholars have powerfully argued that liberalism's neutrality is only apparent, and that it in fact contains a substantive set of principles and notions of the good life – not as ready-made values that may be drawn from its core ideology (à la Alexandre Lefebvre), but as already operative within liberal discourse and defenses.

For example, William Galston rejects defenses of liberalism in the vein of Rawls that posit a total skepticism with regard to conceptions of the good life, arguing that such defenses, against the

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[540] Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, pp. 167–168; Carl Schmitt, "The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations," pp. 92–94. Quote from Voegelin.

[541] For example, see: Bruce A. Ackerman, *The Decline and Fall of the American Republic* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2013); David Runciman, *How Democracy Ends* (New York: Basic Books, 2018); Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

[542] See: John G. Gunnell, *The Descent of Political Theory: The Genealogy of an American Vocation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 132–145

express claims of their proponents, "covertly employ theories of the good:" specifically, that "the fulfillment of the disparate individual purposes" held by purposive agents "is assumed to have intrinsic worth," and that there must exist a "shared commitment to abide by the dictates of rationality in a suitably defined choice situation." Against those "defenders who have persuaded themselves that liberal theory should not be – and is not – linked to any substantive vision of a worthy human existence," Galston advocates expanding the "minimal" conception of the good that its defenders implicitly introduce into their writings, emphasizing individual autonomy and responsibility, toleration of multiform pluralism, and a balance between meritocratic and need-based resource distribution. Citing Aristotle's *Politics*, Galston contends that each form of politics presupposes and must be united by some particular form of meaning.[543]

Steven D. Smith similarly notes that substantive conceptions of meaning are introduced *sotto voce* into liberal politics, though with the consequence that political discussion takes on the character of a shadow play. Smith diagnoses a moral poverty of public discourse – a loss of faith in public discussion of moral claims or concepts in favor of apparently more neutral terms of debate centered on legality, economic efficiency, or the pragmatic exigencies of great power politics. Asking how it is that our social and political "world continues to go on, and not so badly" given this apparent refusal to distinguish the good from the bad, the worthy life from the unworthy life, and the substantively meaningful from the meaningless, Smith claims, much like Galston, that public discourse continues to "smuggle" meaningful normative content into apparently neutral or technical claims:

[543] William Galston, "Defending Liberalism," *The Review of Politics* 76, no. 3 (1982): 621–29.

> "Our modern secular vocabulary purports to render inadmissible notions such as those that animated premodern moral discourse – notions about a purposive cosmos, or a teleological nature stocked with Aristotelian "final causes," or a providential design. But if our deepest convictions rely on such notions, and if these convictions lose their sense and substance when divorced from such notions, then perhaps we have little choice except to smuggle such notions into the conversation – to introduce them incognito under some sort of secular disguise."[544]

Smith's account resonates with past arguments that meaningful conceptions and judgements are implied by many apparently neutral terms. Indeed, both Quentin Skinner's notion of "evaluative-descriptive terms" and W. B. Gallie's notion of "essentially contested concepts" suggest that even apparently technical claims about, for example, economic "progress" are upheld by an unspoken substrate of meaning comprising ideas of the good, of legitimacy, or of worthiness.[545]

Extrapolating from these scholars, we might claim that one reason liberalism is often taken to be inherently meaningless is that it attempts to conceal its substantive commitments behind supposedly neutral language. Indeed, returning to Habermas' postsecularism seems to support this contention: even after recognizing the necessity of eschewing neutrality in the interest of managing meaningful claims in the public sphere, Habermas nonetheless attempts to ground this management in a "neutral" principle of the universal accessibility of reasons. Hence, liberalism appears to have no substantive value commitments because, in the minds of many of its most prominent theorists (as well as in their justifications and defenses), it indeed does not. And, as a result, liberalism therefore appears

[544] Steven D. Smith, *The Disenchantment of Secular Discourse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), pp. 26–27

[545] Quentin Skinner, "Moral Principles and Social Change," in *Visions of Politics: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 145–57; W. B. Gallie, "Essentially Contested Concepts," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 56 (1956): 167–98.

to lack the philosophical, ideological, or political resources to defend itself against irruptions of meaningful politics that threaten the liberal order.

But appearance and reality diverge here. As argued above and in Chapter 4, once liberalism recognizes the public efficacy of substantive meaning, it can no longer neutrally quarantine such meaning in the private sphere and must establish substantive principles on the basis of which it evaluates and manages hard alternatives. None of this means abjuring the real advances liberalism has made in accommodating a range of creeds, philosophies, and ways of life. But it does mean that any political theory or ideology, liberalism included, must contend seriously with the problem of meaning and politics by determining not only what its substantive conception of meaning is, but how to defend these principles against threats.

It has not been the aim of this dissertation to offer a "solution" to the political crisis of meaning in liberal democracies – indeed, one of the key takeaways of those writers addressed in this project is that there can be no genuine once-and-forever solution to this problem. No substantive meaning applied to liberalism, nor any articulation of its "heroic" struggle against absolutism and theocracy, will provide assurance against threatening irruptions of politics that locate the meaning of collective life in exclusionary conceptions of religion, race, or nation. For as long as politics exists, so too will there exist contests over the meaning of politics. Instead, this dissertation has sought to clarify the problem of meaning in politics – to shift us away from the notion that liberalism is uniquely susceptible to crises of meaning and clear the way for a more grounded apprehension of the issues at hand.

Above all, this dissertation has aimed to emphasize that the question of human meaning is *not* tangential or supplementary to politics, but central. Questions of the "meaning of life" bear a certain stigma and invoke a certain sense of dread within philosophical and political-theoretical spaces. Indeed, David Cooper has relayed a "rumor" that "a main motive for making formal logic a compulsory first-year course at Oxford was to disabuse students of their image of philosophy as preoccupied with the meaning of life."[546] This stigma may in part be due to the notion that such questions are not only insoluble, but entirely incoherent. Karen Carr has traced how philosophical attitudes towards the "loss of all sense of contact with anything that is ultimately true or meaningful" shifted through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from one of despair and a desire to escape this condition to a tacit acceptance of meaninglessness as a "rather banal characterization of the human situation."[547] However, for those concerned with politics, assumptions of an existential condition of meaninglessness can never become unproblematic or banal. Political theorists cannot afford to relinquish debates over the meaning and purpose of collective existence to theologians, metaphysicians, and reactionaries. Political theories, political forms, and political communities each gain their character in large part from how they respond to the problem of meaning and politics: what (if any) substantive conceptions they endorse and how they manage competing conceptions. In this sense, the problem of meaning and politics is the problem of politics itself – and we should treat it as such in our own thinking.

[546] David E. Cooper, *Meaning* (Chesham, UK: Acumen Publishing, 2003), p. 127

[547] Karen L. Carr, *The Banalization of Nihilism: Twentieth-Century Responses to Meaninglessness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

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