Political Violence and Instrumental Use of Religion in the Works of Carl Schmitt and Walter Benjamin

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Abstract: Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt were active in the interwar period, a very difficult time in the history of Germany. The issues of violence, war, and the role of religion in public affairs were of vast importance for both men. I want to show that, in relation to the issues of religion and political theology, both favored instrumentalizing religious concepts in the name of their own political ideas. Schmitt used Catholicism to establish the so-called concrete order, and Benjamin used Judaism to promote Marxist and anarchist ideas of liberation. That means they were more interested in earthly affairs than in having mystical religious experiences or exploring metaphysical concepts of God and the afterworld. I believe that the instrumental use of theology and religion in the works of Schmitt and Benjamin could indicate that theology was then and is now in a big crisis.

Keywords: philosophy of war; philosophy of violence; Carl Schmitt; Walter Benjamin

1. Introduction

The two decades between World War One and World War Two were a very difficult time in the history of Germany. The deepening crisis fostered the development of extremist attitudes and escalated the tensions between the Germans and the Jewish community. All of these resulted in one of the biggest armed conflicts—World War Two and one of the greatest atrocities in the history of humankind—the Shoah. The representatives of various religions and religious traditions, among others, the Catholics and the Jews, had to react to these events and their reactions were varied.

The problems of violence, war, and the role of religion in public affairs were also of vast importance for two prominent thinkers of the Weimar Republic—Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt. The former was deeply influenced by Judaism and the latter by Catholicism, and there is no question that both of these religious traditions were in very complicated relations with the German Protestant mainstream. Nonetheless, Schmitt, on the one hand, became an accomplice of the Nazis and is often labeled as the “Crown Jurist of the Third Reich”, and Benjamin, on the other, was forced to flee Germany and eventually committed suicide near the Spanish border. Their biographies are, therefore, completely different.

Usually, when we speak of their work, we usually perceive them as intellectual opponents (Pospiszyl 2015; Weber 1992). This approach is, of course, true, and it will be visible in this paper, as well. Nonetheless, in recent times various authors have published works that show that their works refer to each other not only in the field of political philosophy and theology but also aesthetics (Agamben 2005a; Falk 2018). de Wilde (2011) was even trying to show that Benjamin and Schmitt have a shared theologico-political approach, which was based on the belief that political phenomena can only be adequately understood in light of certain theological concepts, images, and metaphors. Nonetheless, I cannot agree with this perspective. In this paper, I would like to show that their thinking about theology, God, and religion was influenced by their vision of politics. And because of that, both favored instrumentalizing religious concepts in the name of their political ideas. Their approaches are different, but, in my opinion, they are similar in subordinating their theological intuitions and metaphors to their desired political target state. Obviously, I do...
not want to determine whether they did or did not believe in God because that is impossible. Nonetheless, I want to show that in their texts, their political views determine their vision of religion rather than vice versa. This way of thinking about the relationship between Schmitt and Benjamin is not widespread in the academic world, but, in my opinion, it can shed new light on this relationship.

2. War and Violence in Carl Schmitt’s Political Philosophy

In one of his most famous works, “Political Theology”, Carl Schmitt stated that all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts with the difference that almighty God is replaced with an almighty lawmaker or sovereign (Schmitt 1985, p. 36). This statement, along with his pessimistic anthropology and the concept of concrete order, can be perceived as one of the most important foundations of his political and legal philosophy. Nonetheless, these religious inspirations did not make that his philosophy was driven by some moral intuitions based on love of neighbor. On the contrary, war and violence are crucial elements of his political theory.

Schmitt is well known for his theory of political antagonism. In “The Concept of the Political”, he argued that, by nature, people are divided into two groups, namely friends and enemies: the primary political distinction (Schmitt 2007, p. 26). It is important to underline that the enemy is not only a competitor or rival but also poses a real existential threat to individuals and communities (Schmitt 2007, pp. 28–29). Schmitt’s whole theory of the state is built on this idea. He was also a supporter of strong sovereign power and absolute state unity. In his opinion, the sovereign is the one who can decide to suspend the functioning of the law or to introduce a state of exception (Schmitt 1985, p. 5). The notion of the state of exception is very important for Schmitt’s political philosophy. He believed that the sovereign could suspend the application of the law, including the constitution. This capacity to suspend the law was even compared with God’s intervention in the course of history. Nonetheless, as I will show later in the text, it is not an indication of Schmitt’s admiration of theism but rather his attempt to strengthen his argumentation for his desired political end state.

Schmitt’s sovereign also possesses another crucial prerogative—he can decide who is the friend and who the enemy, and he can therefore make the most important political decisions (Schmitt 2007, p. 39). All remaining activities of the sovereign power may be reduced to staying ready to fight the enemy, even if war never breaks out. On the other hand, it is important to stress that Schmitt was not a warmonger. He only claimed that permanent existential danger is inherent in human nature and that the state needs to be ready to fight for survival. War is neither a goal nor an ideal of politics. It is only one of the possible consequences of choosing an enemy. However, this does not change the fact that, according to Schmitt’s theory, the real possibility of fighting to the death, which results from the distinction between friends and enemies, is a condition for the emergence of any politics.

War remains the most extreme possibility today. One can say that the exceptional case has an especially decisive meaning, exposing the core of the matter, for only real combat reveals the most extreme consequence of the political grouping of friend and enemy. From this most extreme possibility, human life derives its specific political tension. A world in which the possibility of war is utterly eliminated, a completely pacified globe, would be a world without the distinction of friend and enemy and hence a world without politics (Schmitt 2007, p. 35).

The place of war in Schmitt’s philosophy shows that, according to him, violence cannot be eliminated from human experience. Such an attitude resulted from his pessimistic anthropology. He was convinced that men are predestined for conflict, not for cooperation. Therefore, the main goal of any political community is to ensure the safety of its members and to prepare them to fight the enemy.

Nonetheless, Schmitt’s concept of the political differs significantly from the traditional Catholic theory of the state. It is particularly evident in his philosophy of war, which
contradicts Christ’s command to love your enemies. The German philosopher addressed this problem in “The Concept of the Political”.

The enemy is not merely any competitor or just any partner of a conflict in general. He is also not the private adversary whom one hates. An enemy exists only when, at least potentially, one fighting collectivity of people confronts a similar collectivity. The enemy is solely the public enemy because everything that has a relationship to such a collectivity of men, particularly to a whole nation, becomes public by virtue of such a relationship. The enemy is hostis, not inimicus in the broader sense; polemis, not echthros. As German and other languages do not distinguish between the private and political enemy, many misconceptions and falsifications are possible. The often quoted “Love your enemies” (Matt. 5:44; Luke 6:27) reads “diligite inimicos vestros,” agapate tous echthrous ymon, and not “diligite hastes vestras”. No mention is made of the political enemy. Never in the thousand-year struggle between Christians and Moslems did it occur to a Christian to surrender rather than defend Europe out of love toward the Saracens or Turks. The enemy in the political sense need not be hated personally, and in the private sphere only does it make sense to love one’s enemy, i.e., one’s adversary. The Bible quotation touches the political antithesis even less than it intends to dissolve, for example, the antithesis of good and evil or beautiful and ugly. It certainly does not mean that one should love and support the enemies of one’s own people. (Schmitt 2007, pp. 28–29)

Schmitt’s solution to this problem is based on the distinction between the political enemy and the adversary in private life. In his view, moral standards are important only in the case of the latter, not the former.

Yet, such a distinction is not present in the traditional Catholic theory of war. Early Christians were generally against war and violence. As the persecuted minority, they usually did not have to participate in military campaigns. It changed after the Edict of Milan, which made the Christians full citizens of the Roman Empire. But even after there were many discussions about the right Christian attitude towards war. Many important authors, such as John Chrysostom, Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, and later Francis of Assisi, were against the involvement of Christians in armed conflicts (Łuszczyńska and Łuszczyński 2019, pp. 10–11). In the Middle Ages, Christian theologians decided to develop the concept of just war to reconcile their moral code with political necessities. Thomas Aquinas set out conditions against which to judge whether a war should be waged (jus ad bellum) and if it could be justified, and how it should be waged (jus in bello). He is also convinced that any war must be fought to promote good or avoid evil, with the aim of restoring peace and justice once the war is over (Aquinas 1911–1925, Summa Theologiae II-II, p. 40). Moral constraints are therefore present both on the individual and political level.

Schmitt’s interpretation of Christ’s command to love your enemies is unorthodox. It shows that, according to him, the political sphere is foundational and should be situated above the sphere of morality, even if we agree that moral rules are given by God. In “The Concept of the Political”, Schmitt did not comment on the concept of just war, but this theory is addressed by him in his later work, “Nomos of the Earth”. He admitted that the idea of Pax Christiana was an important stage in the development of the world’s spatial-political order (Schmitt 2003, pp. 56–66), but he values more the Westphalian Order, the ius publicum Europaenum, which is based on the idea of state sovereignty and the non-discriminatory concept of war, according to which, all parties during the conflict are considered justus hostis and cannot be treated as criminals, regardless their motivation for joining the war (Schmitt 2003, pp. 120–21). The result of such a concept of war was to be the rationalization and humanization of European wars, which was to be particularly visible in contrast to bloody religious wars or private wars from the Middle Ages and religious wars in the 15th and 16th centuries (Schmitt 2003, pp. 140–41). The war was given a specific legal form, thanks to which it could be limited. The war did not have to lead to the complete annihilation of the enemy. Ius publicum Europaenum, based on power politics and specific legal solutions, was,
according to Schmitt, much more effective than the moral theories of *Pax Christiana*, which, in a side note, were, according to Schmitt, only an addition to the institutional order, not the essence of the medieval Christian order.

However, one should not forget that the force of such moral-theological and juridical evaluations was derived not from themselves, but from concrete institutions. Peace, in particular, was not a free-floating, normative, general concept, but, rather, oriented concretely to the peace of the empire, the territorial ruler, of the church, of the city, of the castle, of the marketplace, of the social juridical assembly. (Schmitt 2003, p. 59)

It is therefore evident that he was an advocate of the separation of morality and politics, which is indeed a crucial element of his theory and which has a crucial meaning for his philosophy of war and violence. Nonetheless, this seems to substantially distance him from the orthodox Catholic theory of politics.

3. Catholicism as the ‘Political Form’, Not the True Faith

In order to understand how Schmitt reconciled his Machiavellian vision of politics with his esteem towards the Catholic Church, it is important to take a closer look at the aspects of the Church that he admired. In the work “Roman Catholicism and Political Form”, Schmitt recognized that the problem of social order—whether political, legal, or cultural—is inexorably associated with the question of institutional form (Meierhenrich 2017, p. 188). Therefore, he was mostly interested in the Church as an enduring institution. He idealized the institutional history of the Catholic Church and searched for a functional equivalent to govern the politics of the early twentieth century.

The essence of the Roman Catholic complexio oppositorum lies in a specific, formal superiority over the matter of human life, such as no other imperium has ever known. It has succeeded in constituting a sustaining configuration of historical and social reality that, despite its formal character, retains its concrete existence at once vital and yet rational to the nth degree. (Schmitt 1996a, p. 8)

As Balakrishnan (2000, p. 55) notes, Schmitt’s ideas “owed very little to the theological traditions of the Church”. It was also evident in our brief reconstruction of Schmitt’s interpretation of Christian morality and just war theory. If he did refer to some Catholic thinkers, such as Francisco de Vitoria (Schmitt 2003, pp. 101–25) or Juan Donoso Cortés (Schmitt 2002, pp. 80–86), he used them only when they backed his own views. Catholic dogma and metaphysics were important for him only because they made it possible to create and maintain social order.

[The Church] represents the civitas humana. It represents in every moment the historical connection to the incarnation and crucifixion of Christ. It represents the Person of Christ Himself: the God who in historical reality became man. Therein lies its superiority over an age of economic thinking. (Schmitt 1996a, p. 19)

He, therefore, did not appreciate the Catholic faith as such, but as some type of Catholic rationality with its ability to represent values, which was able to challenge the economic rationality associated with liberalism and capitalism, of which Schmitt was a fervent critic.

Economic rationalism has accustomed itself to deal only with certain needs and to acknowledge only those it can “satisfy.” In the modern metropolis, it has erected an edifice wherein everything runs strictly according to plan—everything is calculable. A devout Catholic, precisely following his own rationality, might well be horrified by this system of irresistible materiality. (Schmitt 1996a, p. 15)

Many Catholics were, indeed, horrified by the capitalist system, but, on the other hand, Schmitt was horrified, as well. He was horrified because liberalism and capitalism were threatening the sphere of the political. Schmitt describes Catholicism as “eminently political” (Schmitt 1996a, p. 16). In my opinion, he was not trying to protect the “Catholic
rationality” but the “political rationality”, even if he was trying to convince his readers that they are very similar.

Catholicism was to provide the conceptual basis for the political order, the basis that was missing in the Hobbesian concept of Leviathan. Meierhenrich (2017, p. 190) showed that the absence of “myth” Schmitt considered a structural weakness of Leviathan, a liability that diminished the institution’s capacity to create or maintain political order. In his eyes, the Hobbesian state was an abstract form without substance. The mythology of Catholicism, by contrast, supplied a veritable cornucopia of substance that promised to ensure that political order was not just stable and durable but also culturally meaningful. The idea of Catholicism to him seemed an ingenious and desirable example of an anti-modern order. Nonetheless, misgivings about Roman institutionalism tempered Schmitt’s enthusiasm for the Catholic solution to the problem of political order. Later on, he began to think about political order increasingly in the particular and secular sense. Eventually, he turned towards Nazi ideology, which was definitely anti-Catholic and founded on completely different foundations.

All other Catholic motifs in Schmitt’s thinking can also be connected to the notion of political order. For example, the figure of katechon, the restrainer who can delay the Apocalypse, was secularized by Schmitt. Schmitt’s katechon is a functional term, a figure that is defined by its role and political potential rather than by its identity. And the political role of the katechon is to prevent or at least delay the emergence of political disorder. Whenever Schmitt wrote about the Reich and its role in world history, he attributed the katechon a protective role as a restraining force (Schmitt 2003, p. 60). Interestingly, Schmitt also perceived himself as the katechon, who was trying to defend the spatial-political order that was to vanish. He was aware of the rise of the liberal idea, but he believed that he could be a part of a barrier capable of deferring the transition once more (Simons 2017, p. 797). But this, once more, proves that he instrumentalized and secularized the concept.

Catholicism was a part of Schmitt’s identity, but it was not the core of it. His self-description as a “Catholic layman of German nationality and citizenship” (Schmitt 1991, p. 283) can be perceived as ironic, especially if consider that he did not participate in religious ceremonies, distanced himself from the German Catholic community, and was even excommunicated because of his civil marriage with orthodox Dushka Todorović (Mehring 2017, pp. 74–78). As many scholars note, Schmitt’s political, cultural, and legal thought was developed in response to the same fundamental concern—the problem of social order. Meierhenrich and Simons (2017, pp. 49–55) show that Schmitt thought takes the form of the Trinity. Despite inconsistencies in his writings, Schmitt’s theoretical project was ultimately coherent, centering on the motif of order.

My point is that his trinity of thought overshadowed the Holy Trinity. In Schmitt’s thinking, Catholic theology is instrumentalized and used to build the concrete order. Some authors, for example, Kaczorowski (2022), are trying to show that in the philosophy of Schmitt, “the Church and the state are essentially linked by religiosity as the fundamental dimension of both these entities” and that the state de facto plays a subservient role to the eternal Church, but I cannot agree that with that point of view. As was noted before, the Church is important to make the state culturally meaningful, and the state, not the Church, is at the center of Schmitt’s theory. Schmitt’s focus is not on individual ethics but on a collective authority, not on a formative spirit but on a substantive form, not on the private initiative but on a public institution.

Even if he did not describe himself as a Catholic thinker, he still used the church’s authority in his political theology. Nonetheless, it is important to note that Schmitt’s concrete order is deprived of morality, which is pushed down into the private sphere. His concept of the political was aimed to maintain order and contain the outbursts of violence by demilitarizing and delegitimizing the private actors, but, as Teschke (2017, pp. 372–76) shows, this solution was not as effective as Schmitt wanted to purport. The liberal concepts of international law and a ban on aggression, criticized and rejected by the author of “The Concept of the Political”, proved to be much more effective. Moreover, Schmitt’s concept
of the Großraum order, proposed as an alternative to liberal universalist ideas, provided legitimization for German military expansion in Europe (Schmitt 2011; see also Teschke 2017, pp. 375–80). Choosing concrete order as a central value of his thought caused Schmitt to end up with a violence-promoting political philosophy that turned out to be inefficient. Nonetheless, the Catholic inspirations in Schmitt’s thought are not responsible for its violent character. On the contrary, if he wanted to draw from orthodox Catholic philosophy and theology, he might have altered his theory and completed it with some moral constraints.

When we look at the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, we will find out that order was a very important value for him, as well. The author of “Summa Theologica” emphasized the role of order and peace, which are to be ensured by the monarchical form of power and social hierarchy, though this is not the essence of his theory but merely a means to an end, which is to lead the members of the political community to salvation. And what is also important, the state is not only needed to ensure safety. The key role of the state is to organize the society so that the people can strive for the full perfection of their existence (Aquinas 2007, Commentary on Politics, Book 1, Lessons 1–2; 1949, On Kingship). Neither of these perspectives is present in Schmitt’s philosophy. It is not clear, however, whether such perspectives can be integrated into his philosophy at all, especially when we consider his pessimistic anthropology, which is completely different from Thomas’ neo-Aristotelian anthropology.

4. Messianism and the Divine Violence in Walter Benjamin’s Political Philosophy

Now I would like to turn to Walter Benjamin, his philosophy of violence and Judaic inspirations that were essential for his philosophy. Undoubtedly, his political philosophy differs significantly from Schmitt’s, and the controversy between these two German thinkers was analyzed by various philosophers, including Agamben (2005a, pp. 52–64). Nonetheless, Benjamin seemed to have agreed with Schmitt that violence is an indelible aspect of political reality. Whereas Schmitt was reconciled with the fact that violence is the foundation of politics, Benjamin was trying to find a way out of this situation and disarm the mechanism of violence. For the German-Jewish thinker, the social and political reality is founded on oppression, reinforced by the self-perpetuating mechanism of violence (Benjamin 1986, pp. 299–300). Although Benjamin did not fight on the front, World War I certainly was a life-changing event for him. Before the Great War, he was more optimistic. He was writing texts about the German Youth and its potential, which would be actualized once they were freed from the Wilhelmine social and educational system (Benjamin 2011b). His reform plans were thwarted by the outbreak of the war, which pushed some of Benjamin’s friends to suicide and traumatized the whole generation (Jay 1999).

After the war, the situation was very difficult, as well. The rise of Fascism throughout Europe made Benjamin think that the mechanisms of oppression were so strong that it would be extremely difficult to undermine them. Nonetheless, he did not stop disputing with Fascist authors, inter alia with Carl Schmitt. In one of his texts, he referred to his theory of the state of exception.

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the “state of emergency” in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism. (Benjamin 1999, p. 257)

Benjamin was trying to show that the concept of sovereignty, which was crucial for Schmitt, is in fact an instrument of oppression. The sovereign does not suspend the application of law only in exceptional cases, but he does it all the time. The legal protection of the citizens is, therefore, only an illusion. This way of thinking about political reality relates to his pessimistic vision of history, which is described in his famous metaphor of the angel of history:
A Klee painting named “Angelus Novus” shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin 1999, pp. 257–58)

The historical process appears as a series of catastrophes, as an oppressive mechanism. Benjamin’s philosophy of history is, therefore, not a philosophy of progress. Nonetheless, Benjamin was trying to break this chain of events, and his analysis of the phenomenon of violence can be perceived as an attempt to do so. His main idea may be formulated as follows. The modern legal order is based on two types of violence: lawmaking and law-preserving violence. However, it should be noted that we are dealing with a self-reinforcing dialectic of these two types of violence rather than a clear separation between them (Benjamin 1986, pp. 280–89). Since all violence within the state is aimed to make or preserve the law, then we have to find some other type of violence, one that would not aim to achieve any of these purposes. At first glance, we could say that this condition is fulfilled by the so-called mythical violence, that is, violence that has no goal and is only a manifestation of will and the existence of a certain force. This kind of violence appears to exist outside of the legal sphere. But Benjamin argued that even such violence could only function as a lawmaking or law-preserving force because when this force manifests itself, it creates a new order, which reproduces the historical mechanism of violence (Benjamin 1986, pp. 294–97).

The situation seems hopeless, but at this moment, Benjamin decided to use the concept of the Messiah. He introduces the fourth type of violence, which he calls Divine Violence. This kind of violence does not create a new order but is law-destroying. Benjamin characterized it as follows:

Just as in all spheres God opposes myth, mythical violence is confronted by the divine. And the latter constitutes its antithesis in all respects. If mythical violence is lawmaking, divine violence is law-destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythical violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood. The legend of Niobe may be confronted, as an example of this violence, with God’s judgment on the company of Korah. It strikes privileged Levites, strikes them without warning, without threat, and does not stop short of annihilation. But in annihilating it also expiates, and a deep connection between the lack of bloodshed and the expiatory character of this violence is unmistakable. ( . . . ) Mythical violence is bloody power over mere life for its own sake, divine violence pure power over all life for the sake of the living. The first demands sacrifice, the second accepts it. (Benjamin 1986, p. 297)

The concept of Divine Violence is very ambiguous and allows for many different interpretations. Some scholars, for example Guzmán (2014, pp. 52–53), connect Divine Violence with revolutionary praxis. Others, for example, Pospiszyl (2015, pp. 15–16) on the other hand, are trying to show that Divine Violence is not meant to be real, physical violence but is more like a discursive praxis aimed to disarm the violent, political mechanisms. I will return to this issue in the next part of the paper. But whatever interpretation we choose, the destroying of the mechanism of violence seems to demand a supranatural intervention, which would be able to “blast open the continuum of history” and “bring about the real state of emergency” (Benjamin 1986, pp. 257–62). The Messianic hope played
a very important role in the early works of Benjamin, especially in the “Theological-Political Fragment” (Benjamin 2003, pp. 20–21), but the philosopher returned to it at the end of his short life in “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, which can mean that the concept was of vast importance for him.

Nonetheless, it is very difficult to specify the essence of Benjamin’s messianism. To better understand Benjamin’s messianism, we can turn toward the theory of Gershom Scholem. According to him, Jewish theology insists that messianism is an external historical occurrence. He argued that Judaism could not accept the attitude which presents redemption in an individual’s soul, denigrating the national, social, and cosmic aspects of the messianic event (Dan 1992, p 121; Scholem 1995). And when we agree that Benjamin ignored the issue of the nation, there is no doubt that the coming of the Messiah has to have cosmic and historical importance for all humankind.

Nonetheless, scholars specializing in Jewish messianism indicate that there are four basic types of messianism:

1. Apocalyptic messianism—when the final redemption arrives, the world as we know it will come to a catastrophic end;
2. Restorative messianism—the messianic era will be characterized primarily by the restoration of Jewish sovereignty in the land of Israel and the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem;
3. Passive messianism—redemption comes primarily through divine initiative, and the influence of human beings on the messianic process is limited;
4. Active messianism—the messianic era is also brought about by God’s involvement in history, but here human beings are seen as playing a critical role (see Eisen 2011, pp. 146–47).

Benjamin’s messianism is definitely of an apocalyptic type. He spoke of exploding the continuum of history and destroying the mechanism of violence to make the world a completely different and better place. He was never interested in restorative messianism, distanced himself from the Zionist movement, and even after 1933, he turned down Scholém’s proposals to move to Israel and eventually decided to flee to the USA (Eiland 2016, pp. 115–16; Rabinbach 1989, pp. xvi–xxviii). But it is much more difficult to determine whether Benjamin favored passive or active messianism. On the one hand, Divine Violence seems supernatural and not available for use in revolutionary praxis, which always and eventually becomes mythical violence. But on the other, Benjamin was promoting cultural and political activity aimed at disarming the mechanisms of violence (see Jacobson 2003, pp. 212–13). Eventually, I believe Benjamin favored some kind of combination of passive and active messianism. On the one hand, the Messiah redeems, completes, and creates all by himself. On the other, the profane order promoting happiness is capable of promoting the coming of the messianic kingdom, as well (Benjamin 2003, p. 21). The political activity of those striving for happiness should, therefore, be aimed at creating some post-political, Divine reality. But the character of this new reality is not determined by the Word of God but by Marxist utopia.

5. Theology as the Linguistics of God

To better understand Benjamin’s messianism and other Jewish inspirations in his philosophy, it is important to take a closer look at the role of God in his philosophy. Benjamin, just as Schmitt, did not participate in religious ceremonies and was not too familiar with orthodox Jewish theology (Eiland 2016, pp. 113–14; Jacobson 2003, p. 4). Nonetheless, the concept of God played an important role in his early philosophy. He did not perceive God to be a metaphysical entity but rather a metaphysics of divine realms. His political theology is concerned with the profane and consciously addresses itself to it (see Jacobson 2003, p. 5). However, the figure of God is important for his theory of language. God expressed His inner substance to create humanity, and ultimately the universe, “in His image,” but He Himself remains incommunicable, inaudible, and untranslatable. The act of creation is performed linguistically and therefore suggests to Benjamin the existence of a divine language distinct
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from our own. Benjamin considered the magic defined in the relationship between an object and its name in the context of revelation, a transmission of this “substance” from the divine to the profane (Benjamin 2011a, pp. 258–67).

This “linguistic” concept of God provides some hints to better understand Benjamin’s Divine Violence which can now be perceived as a divine language, a new form of communicating, and a new form of existing. However, this vision of God can be compared with the early Christian vision of a God as “the Word” (English Standard Version Bible 2001, John 1:1). On the other hand, it is very difficult to reconcile this vision with the descriptions of God that we can find in the Hebrew Bible. It is particularly visible when considering the relationship between God and war, violence, and law.

First of all, God has given the Law of Moses, and that law was the foundation of Ancient Israel. That means that divine actions were not only law-destroying, as Benjamin wanted, but also law-creating. And, once more, Benjamin seems much closer to the early Christian way of thinking, manifesting in Paul’s Letter to Galatians. Benjamin, as Paul, is trying to situate the messianic hope in the sphere of the “pre-law” or beyond the law:

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose. (English Standard Version Bible 2001, Gal. 2:19–21)

Agamben (2005b) sees a parallel between the thought of Benjamin and the letters of Paul, and even labels him as a “secret” interpreter of Pauline thought. According to him, Benjamin’s final focus was on a “weak messianic force”, which prompted him to envision the messianic as a “state of emergency” in contrast to the states of the world. This translation of a religious concept into a secularized one amounts to an interesting reversal of the “state of emergency” that has been invoked by political systems in a move to overstep their legitimate powers. Rather than portray it as the justification for sovereign power, it dislocates such a form of power by suspending the suspension itself. Agamben describes this process as the fundamental Pauline maneuver, and it pertains, in Agamben’s view, to that part of Benjamin’s philosophy that is most theologically inspired (Dickinson and Symons 2016, pp. 6–8). Another important interpreter, Taubes (2003; see also Eiland 2016), claimed that in his “dying to” both natural law and state law, both Greek rationalism and Jewish legalism, Paul was creating a strategic and explosive political theology that became the prototype of Benjamin’s nihilist messianism. If that is the case, Benjamin is more of a critic of the traditional Biblical thinking about law and violence rather than its continuator.

Secondly, in the Hebrew Bible, violence is not necessarily bloodless. The most essential example is “the Ban”, that is, the war that Israelites were waging against the Canaanites. After the death of Moses, God ordered Josue not only to conquer the Promised Land but also to annihilate all indigenous populations living there earlier. Moreover, God is himself fighting alongside the Israelites, but people also have an important role to play in his plan (Craigie 1978). It is worth noting that some scholars treated the conquest described in the Book of Josue as an exemption and tried to justify it as “moral surgery” (Bruce 1909), but it is almost unimaginable to think that Benjamin could justify it. On the other hand, the annihilation of the Canaanites can be compared with Benjamin’s Divine Violence because it can be interpreted as destroying the old, pagan world to build a new, better world ruled by God.

And finally, in the Hebrew Bible, we can also find descriptions of state-building wars waged by Israeli kings, especially David and Saul. For example, on the one hand, David consults the oracle and uses God’s authority (Niditch 1993, p. 101), but on the other, he also uses war as a political means. Sometimes killing is not ordered by God; is not just vengeance but is a pragmatic act necessary for David to maintain his position (Niditch 1993, p. 129). Many of these wars are also described as if they were in accordance with the will of God, and as examples of state-related violence, they are unacceptable for Benjamin. On the other hand, one can argue that instituting kingship and creating the earthly state of Israel
was the reason for the ultimate downfall of the Chosen People. Bemporad (2009, pp. 109–10) connects the Israelites’ desire for a monarch to pagan kingship and the temptation for hubris and idolatry. And this perspective can be reconciled with Benjamin’s vision that state-related violence is the source of evil. In fact, in the Bible, one can find many different concepts of war, which demand some interpretation, both historical and theological.

Of course, in the rabbinic tradition, we find numerous texts with a pacifistic message (Eisen 2011, p. 69; Bemporad 2009, pp. 113–18), but Benjamin usually did not relate to this tradition. For him, Judaism was primarily a cultural phenomenon that could carry a very important, emancipatory message. To that extent, Benjamin can be compared to secular Zionists (Eisen 2011, pp. 195–201), with the caveat that his vision was universalist, and he was not interested in reinstating the state of Israel. He glanced at the possibility of an emancipated Zionism of the spirit, which would promote “a certain Jewish gesture” (Benjamin 1995, pp. 82–83). Still, such Zionism turns out to be an idea that is thoroughly esoteric and has not much in common with the actual Zionism of that time.

I see three kinds of Zionist Judaism: the Palestine Zionism (a necessity of nature), the German Zionism in its halfheartedness, and the cultural Zionism that sees Jewish values everywhere and works for them. I stand with the latter. (Benjamin 1995, p. 72)

Nonetheless, in Benjamin’s philosophy, the Judaic tradition is instrumentalized and used to promote his anarchist or communist ideas. Both in the “Critique of Violence” and the “Theological-Political Fragment”, we notice Benjamin’s hope for the destruction of all oppressive structures. The idea of a spontaneous general proletarian strike culminating in a wild, uncontrolled revolt of the masses is parallelized with the manifestation of Divine Violence. At the same time, nihilistic politics is introduced as the only effective way of accelerating the ongoing catastrophe and thus facilitating the intervention of the Messiah. Interestingly, in both cases, the Divine intervention is to realize or preserve the anarchist society, Benjamin’s political ideal. Of course, I agree with Lesch (2014), who shows that Benjamin referred to the Jewish concept of justice (tzedek) as a Divine category. Benjamin’s target society might be inspired by the Jewish ideal of the community of the righteous who live in the presence of God (Shekhinah), but, from my perspective, it is not enough to say that Benjamin was thinking metaphysically about God and the Messiah. His main goal was to deconstruct the Western concepts of right and justice, which he perceived as the foundations of the political order he was trying to undermine.

This instrumentalization, however, is not as evident as in the case of Schmitt due to the fact that Judaism is often viewed as a cultural rather than purely religious phenomenon. Whereas Schmitt was using religion to secure the concrete order, Benjamin was doing the same to destroy that order and find liberation. And despite he once said that he wanted to create a “philosophy of Judaism” (Scholem 1981, p. 32), in my opinion, Judaism was never at the core of his thinking and was perceived by him, paradoxically, as some form of cultural capital.

6. Benjamin, Schmitt and the Religious Experience

It can therefore be concluded that in the philosophies of Schmitt and Benjamin, thinking about religion is inseparable from issues relating to the sphere of politics. Nonetheless, religion is not a mere metaphysical construct that can organize reality. Individual and collective religious experiences play a crucial role, as well. It is important to analyze how Schmitt and Benjamin perceived the religious experience and its role in their political theologies.

For Schmitt, the individual religious experience did not play an important role. In fact, he perceived it as a threat to the political order. This is why he was against the Hobbesian idea of freedom in the sphere of private religion. The author of The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes is dissatisfied that Hobbes’ demand for public confession implies a private, interior faith that is unknowable and hence beyond the grasp of political power. Individual, authentic religious experience can undermine the unity of the political community
and support the development of liberal attitudes. Therefore, such an experience should be suppressed or even excluded.

The distinction between private and public, faith and confession, fides and confession, is introduced in a way from which everything else was logically derived in the century that ensued until the rise of the liberal constitutional state. The modern “neutral” state, derived from agnosticism and not from the religiosity of Protestant sectarians, originated at this point. If looked at from the perspective of constitutional history, a dual beginning was made here: first, the juristically (not theologically) constructed beginning of modern, individualistic right of freedom of thought and conscience and thereby the characteristic individual freedoms embodied in the structure of the liberal constitutional system. (Schmitt 1996b, p. 56)

Nonetheless, Reinhard Mehring suggests that we may find some type of religious experience in Schmitt’s way of life and thinking. According to him, Schmitt experienced everyday life as a state of exception that can be analyzed in terms of widely understood mysticism.

Schmitt was such an individualist and esoteric. In his whole pathos and in his practice of enacting his life as a state of exception, he was permeated by a feeling of contingency and unpredictability. He staged his life as an ongoing state of exception, insofar as he constantly found his way into situations from which he needed “saving” by his contemporaries or by a religiously interpreted coincidence. (Mehring 2017, p. 86)

I cannot agree with this perspective. In my opinion, Schmitt’s attitude should be interpreted psychologically, not religiously. This way of interpreting Schmitt is present in the text of Bendersky (2017), who shows that the feeling of fear was at the core of the personality of the author of Political Theology. And this fear of disorder led him to suppress his own religious experience and the religious experience of others.

The search for security, which many would later identify as an underlying principle of his political and legal theory, was far more than a reaction to the decades of crises and cataclysms following World War I. It was intrinsic to his personality and mental framework long before the outbreak of war. He was not a heroic figure challenging the world but was someone who recoiled from it, seeking escape or protection from the pressures, dangers, and vicissitudes of life. Probably the most recurring phrase throughout his diaries is Angst vor (fear of, or worried about). Such a mindset of doubt and fear is not conducive to optimism in political thought. (Bendersky 2017, pp. 121–22)

It is important to consider the historical circumstances in which Schmitt wrote his texts. As I mentioned before, the Great War traumatized the whole generation. The interwar period was also a difficult time in the history of Germany, when the nation was trying to shake off the defeat. Many Germans wanted to know who was responsible for this disaster since, at the war’s end, the German army was still in enemy territory. One of the most popular theories was the Stab-in-the-back myth. According to this theory, the military failure resulted from the “betrayal” of the Socialists, who unleashed the November Revolution and led to the abdication of the Kaiser (Barth 2003). Today we know that in 1918 the situation on the front was critical (Watson 2008), but in the Weimar Republic, the myth of the invincible German Army was influential, especially in the right-wing circles.

Schmitt’s mindset of fear and doubt harmonized with his pessimistic anthropology. His theory of the internal enemy is principally in line with the Stab-in-the-back myth. Moreover, the postulate of absolute state unity may be perceived as an attempt to avoid a defeat in the future. Even if we assume that Schmitt was a religious person, his religion is the religion of fear, not the religion of hope. Nonetheless, I believe that he was not afraid of God but of the collapse of the political order.
Benjamin, on the other hand, developed a philosophy of experience, in which the religious is an inalienable aspect of experience itself. Especially when we realize how afraid he was of the rise of scientist determinations of experience that would replace “metaphysical” accounts, his philosophy can also be regarded more as a practice than a system in the Enlightenment sense. Naishtat (2019) notes that Benjamin was thinking more of a decentralized notion of experience based on transmission rather than on inner consciousness; on languages and translation rather than on authenticity and selfhood. Britt (2020), in turn, points at Benjamin’s interest in habit as a source of collective experience and potential change. This habit is most evident in religious practices, and, from Benjamin’s perspective, such habits should be an element of creating a collective identity that can undermine oppressive political mechanisms.

The gently rising, curved baroque staircase leading to the church. The railing behind the church. The litanies of the old women at the “Ave Maria”: preparing to die first-class. If you turn around, the church verges like God himself on the sea. Each morning the Christian era crumbles the rock, but between the walls below, the night falls always into the four old Roman quarters. Alleyways like air shafts. A well in the marketplace. In the late afternoon, women around it. Then, in solitude: archaic plashing. (Benjamin 2016, p. 66)

Moreover, in Benjamin’s thought, the concept of the pursuit of happiness is linked to the religious experience. According to him, the earthly world must pass away, but its passing can only be achieved through happiness. This happiness is at once constituted to be worldly and, at the same time messianic, in the sense of being directed toward messianic activity (Jacobson 2003, pp. 37–38). That means that Benjamin, in contrast to Schmitt, did not want to suppress the individual and collective religious experience. On the contrary, he stressed the importance of such experiences for achieving political change. As Kuhnle (2012) shows, Benjamin perceived the theological as the real de-mystified and de-fetishized experience of the social. However, that means that this authentic religious experience is not an end in itself but is included in political theory.

7. Conclusions

Both Schmitt and Benjamin developed some kind of political theology. Some scholars, for example Jacobson (2003, pp. 5–6), urge that these two ideas are incomparable, but I believe even though they had different goals, their means were quite similar. Both used theological concepts without in-depth reference to the traditions in which these concepts emerged and were developed. They were focused solely on earthly affairs, turning towards religion and metaphysics only when they found obstacles to their theory. Schmitt felt God was a better foundation for the state than the Hobbesian social contract, which in his opinion was unable to ensure lasting order. Benjamin, on the other hand, turned to Messianic hope when he realized that previous revolutionary efforts ended up re-instituting the mechanism of violence and were unable to blast apart the continuum of history.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that Benjamin, in contrast to Schmitt, did not deprive his vision of religiosity of the element of the individual and collective religious experience. His instrumentalization was not as radical as Schmitt’s. However, it was not because he believed that such an experience had intrinsic value. Rather he perceived it as a means to lift people out of the ordinary experience and to make political change possible. And this potential to change was the very reason why Schmitt wanted to suppress the private faith. Their differences in this matter result directly from their philosophical assumptions, and it does not disprove the thesis that they both instrumentalize religion in a similar way.

Jacob Taubes tried to show that both Benjamin and Schmitt tried to save metaphysics from diametrically opposed poles—the former by combining neo-Marxism and theology, and the latter by mixing Catholicism and the forces of the counterrevolution (Taubes 1987, see also Bredekamp 2017, p. 681). Nonetheless, I cannot agree with this perspective. They were trying to mix theology and ideology, but it was not the metaphysics that was at stake.
Metaphysics was some sort of a last resort to save their worldviews. As Mehring (2017, p. 83) notes, Schmitt turned toward the notion of God only at the end of his life, though even then, God remains theologically very indeterminate and is only clear in its political objective against the modern demand for autonomy and the self-deification of man. And Benjamin’s theology is also not metaphysical and can be compared to Christian liberation theology, which focuses on earthly liberation (Grey 1994, pp. 515–18). Benjamin perceived a political order of any kind as morally suspect. On the other hand, he was unsure how to build a society without any form of authority. Eventually, he decided to use the concept of the Messiah, whose presence will compensate for human imperfections. Nonetheless, it was not his only answer. It should be noted that he has also considered communism as the means to achieve his desired apolitical target state.

I am not ashamed of my “early” anarchism but consider anarchist methods to be useless, Communist “goals” to be nonsense and nonexistent. This does not diminish the value of Communist action one iota, because it is the corrective for its goals and because there are no meaningfully political goals. (Benjamin 2012, p. 301)

Such conduct is nothing new in the intellectual history of humankind. Even Plato turned towards myth when he could not find a sufficient rational foundation for his theories (Edelstein 1949). Nonetheless, I believe that the instrumental use of theology and religion in the works of Schmitt and Benjamin could indicate that theology was then and is now in a big crisis. This crisis became evident after the Holocaust (Eckardt 1986; Haynes 1994), but, as we can see, signs of this crisis were also visible in the works of Schmitt and Benjamin. In the turbulent, violent times of the first half of the twentieth century, they were not looking for hope in God, but rather they wanted to make this world a better place. Of course, they differed significantly in their perception of this “better” world, but they were similar in using religion and God as a type of metaphor and linguistic tool.

Schmitt admired the Catholic Church for being able to create such an idea of representation that was able to adjust to the changing world and build a lasting organizational structure. And Benjamin was interested in the notion of divine language that could disarm the existing discourse of power. The most important conclusion from my analysis is that the differences between the philosophies of Benjamin and Schmitt result more from the differences in their visions of the target state than from their visions of the religions. These differences in the visions of the target state resulted from different anthropological assumptions. I am unsure to what extent these assumptions were inspired by the religious traditions, perhaps not to such an extent as usually believed.

In modern times, many people looking for hope in the Abrahamic religions can, on the one hand, often turn to some emotional practices and distance themselves from rational theology. On the other hand, they may decide on a return to tradition, to some achievements made before the postmodern deconstruction of grand narratives. Schmitt and Benjamin were trying to find a “third way”. They could not believe in paradise longer, but at the same time, they did not want to be doomed to contingency. They noticed philosophy itself has its boundaries, but religion has also lost its rational ground.

Of course, there is no doubt there was a theological crisis in the first half of the 20th century. But it is important to try to find the answer to why this crisis occurred. Obviously, finding a comprehensive answer requires a very wide-ranging study, but Schmitt and Benjamin give us at least some interesting leads. Firstly, we can notice that the role of religion was undermined by the rise of all-encompassing political ideologies, Communism and Fascism. They were so attractive that it was on their basis that people wanted to build a new metaphysics, sometimes only harmonizing it with the traditional religious worldview or drawing on religious inspiration.

Secondly, Weber’s (1999) notion of “disenchantment” could also be useful. When in modern society scientific understanding is more highly valued than belief, there are two strategies for rescuing religious thinking. Schmitt was trying to artificially “reenchant” the political authority to stabilize the political order. And Benjamin was using religious ideas to
better understand the rules governing the society. Nonetheless, he eventually realized that changing the world requires an authentic “reenchanting” of the social reality in Messianic hope. However, in the era of great secular ideologies, it was extremely difficult.

Both Benjamin and Schmitt were trying to deal with the political and theological problems of their times. However, as I have shown, their ideas have some drawbacks, and the question of the relationship between philosophy and theology remains open.

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**Notes**

1. Undoubtedly, the attitude of the Catholic Church towards war changed throughout history, and the tension between the political and spiritual dimensions of the Church was evident, especially when the State of the Church was involved in many political conflicts in Europe (Minois 1994). During World War I, an important point of reference for Schmitt, the authority was in crisis. On the one hand, Pope Benedict XV was against the war. On the other, national clergy in warring states were usually patriotic and backed the war effort (Brennan 2013). For example, Lebreton (1916) stated that by killing the enemy, we do the duty for our homeland and by loving them—for the Church. These two attitudes were reconcilable for him. Schmitt was, therefore, not alone in his views, but a complete rejection of the moral sphere distinguishes him from even the most radical Catholic authors.

2. The analysis of the concepts of war in the Hebrew Bible can be found throughout the work of Niditch (1993). She shows that the idea of the Ban and of the Lord of Hosts can be perceived as the early concept of war and indicates that it later evolved towards the ideology of non-participation. Nonetheless, the early concepts mentioned above were never abandoned and remained an important element of the Jewish identity.

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