

The Spectres of Schmitt Identity, Decision, and the Name of YHWH

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Abstract. — *This article investigates the legacy of the “political theology” of the German legal scholar Carl Schmitt (1888-1985) in the oeuvres of the French philosopher Alain de Benoist (°1943), intellectual key figure of Europe’s “New Right,” and the political philosopher Chantal Mouffe (°1943), one of the most prominent thinkers of a Schmitt-inspired left, and critically analyses the compatibility of a radical decisionism (as defended by Benoist, Mouffe and Schmitt) with a Christian perspective. A first part examines Schmitt’s influence on the ideological cornerstones of the “New Right” and the ways in which they are entangled with illiberal religious options, ultimately grounded in a form of radical decisionism. A second part contrasts Benoist’s reading of Schmitt with the reception of Schmitt’s thinking in the work of Mouffe. It is argued that due to sharing Schmitt’s decisionism, Mouffe’s attempt to think both “with and against Schmitt” ultimately suffers from similar aporias as does Benoist’s reading of Schmitt and thus fails to offer a viable democratic alternative. The last part of the article turns back to Schmitt himself to analyse whether a radical decisionist position is compatible with Judeo-Christian tradition. It critically examines Schmitt’s references to papal infallibility as an alleged role model of decisionist sovereignty and investigates different theological concepts of divine sovereignty, which at first sight seem to invite a decisionist reading. Taking the revelation of God’s name in Ex. 3:14 as central point of reference, an understanding of Judeo-Christian identity is then developed that is neither essentialist nor decisionist and thus offers a promising perspective from which to criticize the attempts to monopolize the Christian tradition by current proponents of the “New Right.”*

I. Introduction

The struggle for identity constitutes one of the most significant signs of our times as claim of recognition for hitherto marginalized minorities and as aggressive forms of religious fundamentalism and (neo-)nationalism alike.¹ From a theological perspective, it is unsettling to observe that we find a good part of the latter, that is forms of neo-nationalism, closely intertwined with religious motifs, too. This is as true for the ideology of Hindutva in India as it is for nationalist Buddhism in Myanmar or Sri

1. I thank Esther Berg-Chan for ironing out the Germanisms in this text.

Lanka. It can be found in Turkish nationalism and in influential sections of the Russian Orthodox Church. It is also evident in the case of evangelical Christian support for Donald Trump in the United States or Jair Messias Bolsonaro in Brazil – to mention only the most striking examples.

This article sets out to analyse a particular strand within this global revival of nationalist forms of political religion, one that is of great importance in the Western context, namely the renewed interest in the “political theology” of the jurist Carl Schmitt (1888-1985), regarded by some as the “crown jurist” of the Third Reich.²

In this article, I will focus on examining the spectres of Carl Schmitt in the oeuvre of the French philosopher Alain de Benoist (°1943), the founding father of the “Nouvelle Droite” in France and one of the intellectual key figures of Europe’s “New Right.” From a theological perspective, the focus on Benoist is interesting for two reasons: First, Benoist’s creative adaptation of Schmitt’s political theology is essential for our understanding of the ideological matrix that in one way or another serves as a framework for most of the contemporary (far-)right movements and parties in the West. Second, the position of Benoist serves as a prime example of the ways in which contemporary (far-)right positions are linked to illiberal religious options. The discussion of Benoist proceeds as follows: Section II.1. provides a short overview of the biographical and historical background of Benoist’s thinking. II.2. explores the ideological cornerstones of the Benoist-inspired “Nouvelle Droite” and indicates in which ways they take up motifs from Schmitt’s work. II.3. examines the religious matrix of Benoist’s thinking, which – although opting for a sort of post-modern neopaganism which apparently separates Benoist from Schmitt – shares a crucial element with him: radical decisionism.

A form of Schmitt-inspired decisionism is today not only to be found among proponents of the “New Right,” it also finds increasing support among proponents of the “left” – being connected, of course, with quite different concerns. Accordingly, part III of this article contrasts Benoist’s reception of Schmitt with the way Schmitt is read by the political philosopher – and also one of the most influential representatives of a “non-foundational left” – Chantal Mouffe (°1943). Part III is structured in analogy to part II: Section III.1. sketches the background of Mouffe’s reception of Schmitt. III.2. examines Mouffe’s attempt to

2. The term “crown jurist” was coined by Schmitt’s contemporaneous opponent Waldemar Gurian (1902-1954). Cf. Bernd Rüthers, *Carl Schmitt im Dritten Reich: Wissenschaft als Zeitgeist-Verstärkung?* (Munich: Beck, ²1989), 92-95. For a detailed biography about Schmitt, cf. Reinhard Mehring, *Carl Schmitt: A Biography* (Cambridge, MA and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2014).

read “Schmitt against Schmitt,” that is to make use of Schmitt’s criticism of liberalism in order to radicalize current “left” politics without assuming the totalitarian consequences of Schmitt’s positions. III.3. takes a look at the role Mouffe attaches to religion and theology. The focus of part III lies on investigating the overlaps and the differences between Benoist’s and Mouffe’s reception of Schmitt and on examining the scope and limitations of Mouffe’s reading of “Schmitt against Schmitt.”

Part IV, finally, turns back to Schmitt himself. The focus of this part is on examining whether and, if so, in which ways a radical decisionism as defended by Benoist, Mouffe, and Schmitt is compatible with a Christian perspective. Such a question is not only of historical interest, but of crucial relevance in the light of current attempts by “Christian” (neo-)nationalists to combine the (neopagan) ideological matrix of Benoist and the “Nouvelle Droite” with an identitarian Christian narrative. Starting from this background, section IV.1. critically examines Schmitt’s references to papal infallibility as an alleged role model of decisionist sovereignty. IV.2. investigates selected traditional concepts of divine sovereignty which at first sight seem to invite a decisionist reading. Finally, IV.3. takes a close look at the revelation of God’s name in Ex. 3:14 as “I will be who I will be” (*’ehyeh ’āšer ’ehyeh*). It is argued that, although the formal structure of God’s name may seem to exhibit astonishing similarities with the radical decisionism of Benoist, Mouffe, and Schmitt, a closer look at the narrative embedding of Ex. 3:14 reveals an understanding of Judeo-Christian identity, that is neither essentialist nor decisionist, and thus offers an interesting perspective from which to criticize the attempts to monopolize the Christian tradition by current proponents of a decisionist “New Right.”

II. Reading Schmitt “from the Right” – Alain de Benoist and the “Nouvelle Droite”

1. *Historical Background and Current Influence*

Alain de Benoist is one of the intellectual key figures within Europe’s New Right.³ Clearly coming from an extreme right background (openly defending racist positions in the early 1960s and supporting French colonial rule in Algeria), Benoist soon recognized the futility of trying to enact openly

3. For a detailed analysis of the origins, the history, and the international impact of Alain de Benoist and the French New Right, cf. Tamir Bar-On, *Where Have All the Fascists Gone?* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007).

extreme right politics in (post-)colonial France. As a result, together with his ideological companions in 1968, he founded GRECE (Groupement de recherche et d'études pour la civilisation européenne/Research and Study Group for European Civilization), a sort of think-tank setting out to renew (far-)“right” thinking from the ground up. It is in this context that Benoist criticized what he called the “Old Right” for ignoring the changed cultural context of their time, for sticking to “outdated” vocabulary and discourses and for lacking a coherent long-term political strategy. Accordingly, the members of GRECE strove to express “right” positions in a “politically correct,” that is “anti-racist,” “anti-totalitarian” and “pro-democratic,” language. Contemporary discourses, they proposed, should be detached from a “right perspective”⁴ in order to make “right” thinking compatible again to mainstream debates. GRECE quickly developed into the main intellectual centre of the French “Nouvelle Droite” and was, in fact, successful in reaching a wider public. In 1978, Benoist’s anthology “Vu de droite”⁵ was awarded the prestigious Prix de l’essai of the Académie française. Since then, Benoist has published over 50 books and more than two thousand articles. His texts have been translated into nearly two dozen languages. The apparent success of the French “New Right” soon inspired the establishment of similar institutions in Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Spain, Portugal, the UK and the Netherlands. Via different pathways, the ideas of Benoist and GRECE substantially influenced (extreme and far) right parties and movements all over Europe. According to Tamir Bar-On the “entire European extreme right-wing political spectrum from the Italian *Legia Nord* [...] to *Vlaams Belang* [...] in Belgium have been influenced by the politically correct language”⁶ of GRECE. Furthermore, Benoist also had considerable influence on the thinking of important proponents of a Russian Eurasianism like Aleksandr Panarin and Aleksandr Dugin, the latter being said to have close connections to Russian elite circles around Vladimir Putin.⁷

4. For Benoist, the term “right” refers not so much to a certain set of ideas, that is a particular semantic “content,” but to a certain *perspective* on interpreting that content. “Right” for Benoist is thus more a formal than a content-related category.

5. Alain de Benoist, *View from the Right: A Critical Anthology of Contemporary Ideas*, 2 vols. (London: Arktos Media, 2017-2018).

6. Tamir Bar-On, “Intellectual Right-Wing Extremism – Alain de Benoist’s Mazeway Resynthesis Since 2000,” in *The Extreme Right in Europe: Current Trends and Perspectives*, ed. Uwe Backes and Patrick Moreau (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), 333-358, 337.

7. Cf. Marina Peunova, “An Eastern Incarnation of the European New Right: Aleksandr Panarin and New Eurasianist Discourse in Contemporary Russia,” *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 16, no. 3 (2008): 407-419.

2. Ideological Cornerstones

Alain de Benoist and GRECE develop their positions in exchange with a wide range of different authors and discourses ranging from the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) and the French pioneer of syndicalism Georges Sorel (1847-1922) to contemporary critics of globalisation. Important points of reference are, above all, the “non-conformist”⁸ thinkers in France in the 1930s (e.g. Emmanuel Mounier [1905-1950], Alexandre Marc [1904-2000] and Robert Aron [1898-1975]), human ethologists like Konrad Lorenz (1903-1989) and Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1928-2018) and representatives of the so-called “Conservative Revolution”⁹ in Germany like Arthur Moeller van den Bruck (1876-1925), Oswald Spengler (1880-1936), Ernst Jünger (1895-1998) and Carl Schmitt (1888-1985). From among the last group, Carl Schmitt plays a decisive role. References to Schmitt are not only frequently found in many of Benoist’s writings (and appear in the form of explicit quotations as well as indirect allusions). Benoist is also editor of the series “Révolution conservatrice” at the editorial Pardès, which in 1990 published a collection of texts by Schmitt translated into French.¹⁰ In 2003, Benoist published an extensive bibliography of Schmitt’s writings and correspondence with the German publishing house De Gruyter.¹¹ And in 2007, he published a book-long essay on the (supposed) topicality of Carl Schmitt in the geopolitical situation after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.¹²

In the following, I will outline the main ideological cornerstones of Benoist’s thinking and indicate in which ways they are prefigured in Carl Schmitt. As basis for this analysis, I will mainly refer to the manifesto

8. For the term “non-conformist” cf. Jean-Louis Loubet del Bayle, *Les non-conformistes des années 30: Une tentative de renouvellement de la pensée politique française* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1969).

9. The term “Conservative Revolution” was propagated by Armin Mohler in his tendentious attempt to distinguish between openly fascist thinkers and other anti-liberal conservative intellectuals of the interwar years who still constitute important points of reference for “conservative” thought in the post-war era. Cf. Armin Mohler, *Die konservative Revolution in Deutschland 1918-1932: Ein Handbuch* [1950] (Graz: Ares-Verlag, 2005). Alain de Benoist encouraged the translation of the book into French. An English translation was published in 2018 with an epilogue by Benoist. Cf. Armin Mohler, *Conservative Revolution in Germany: 1918-1932* (s.l.: Radix, 2018).

10. Carl Schmitt, *Du politique: “légalité et légitimité” et autres essais* (Paris: Pardès, 1990).

11. Alain de Benoist, ed., *Carl Schmitt: Bibliographie seiner Schriften und Korrespondenzen* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2003).

12. Cf. Alain de Benoist, *Carl Schmitt Today: Terrorism, ‘Just’ War, and the State of Emergency* [2007] (London: Arktos Media, 2013).

“The French New Right in the Year 2000,”¹³ which represents a sort of synopsis of Benoist’s thinking over the last decades.

Ethnopluralism

From the late 1960s onwards, Benoist and the members of GRECE empathetically distanced themselves from the racism of the “Old Right.” Instead of “race,” the New Right promotes the concept of “ethnopluralism” according to which the world embraces a broad variety of different “ethnocultural” identities. Accordingly, differences among these identities are no longer explained in biological but in cultural and historical terms. Benoist refers to the German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) to argue that different ethnocultural identities cannot be put into any hierarchical order as each culture would have its own “centre of gravity” and be structured socially and culturally according to its own economy of values.¹⁴ For the New Right it is not the plurality of ethnocultural identities that is problematic – similar to proponents of a “multiculturalism,” Benoist, too, celebrates the diversity of cultural identities as “true wealth of the world.” What is considered problematic is the intermingling of different ethnocultural identities and their merging into one homogenized consumerist culture said to be characteristic of the neoliberal global village. Such merging of identities would allow a small cosmopolitan elite to enjoy a luxurious lifestyle, for all others, however, the uprooting of their formerly “rooted” cultures would result in disorientation and isolation. For Benoist, the main struggle of the New Right must therefore comprise a defence of the “right to difference.”¹⁵

Benoist’s references to difference and plurality obviously try to address postmodern concerns. However, on a more subliminal level, the influence of Schmitt is apparent. Benoist’s usage of the terms “pluriverse” and “pluriversum,” for example, (although without giving explicit reference) clearly connects to a concept which plays a crucial role in Schmitt’s writings: In his famous text *The Concept of the Political* Schmitt affirms that due to the constitutive antagonism of the political, “a world state which

13. Cf. Alain de Benoist and Charles Champetier, “Manifeste: La nouvelle droite de l’an 2000,” *Éléments pour la civilisation européenne* 94 (1999): 11–23. An English translation of the text with the title “Manifesto of the French New Right in the Year 2000” is available online at: <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/5388/a0f125887a784acd36b2d2166705d42ae678.pdf> [accessed February 1, 2019].

14. Cf. Johann Gottfried Herder, *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* [1774] (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

15. These and all following quotes are taken from the English translation indicated above.

embraces the entire globe and all of humanity cannot exit. The political world is a pluriverse, not a universe.”¹⁶ In his later writings such as *The Nomos of the Earth* Schmitt increasingly relates the concept of *Pluriversum* not so much to states but to the plurality of different “spheres of interest” and “cultural spheres.”¹⁷ Benoist’s conception of a pluriverse of different ethnocultural identities is clearly influenced by this line of thought.

Anti-Universalism, Anti-Egalitarianism, Anti-Individualism

Benoist’s ethnopluralist credo goes hand in hand with a fierce attack on all forms of ideas related to the concepts of universalism, egalitarianism and individualism. According to Benoist all three concepts fail to recognize the human being’s fundamental embeddedness into a shared culture and treat him/her not as (s)he is, a concrete reality, but as an abstract and standardized entity. Benoist denies the existence of a universal normative order which would allow for judging the values of the different cultures from the “outside.” Since every ethnocultural entity revolves around its own centre, for Benoist it is not only presumptuous to try to discriminate between what is good and bad in other cultures, any attempt to do so would ultimately constitute an illegitimate act based upon the generalization and elevation of one’s own value system above all others. Benoist explicitly directs his criticism against what he calls the “ideology of human rights.”¹⁸ For Benoist the “regime” of human rights not only reflects the homogenizing abstractedness typical of liberal thinking. As could be observed in the case of the US-war on terror, it would serve as a humanitarian mask for Western neo-imperialism.¹⁹

As Benoist acknowledges, his polemics against “human rights” are also built on Schmitt. Schmitt not only denied the existence of universal values and norms applicable to all cultures, he also strove to unmask the imperialism inherent in the reference to supposedly universal norms and concepts, especially when linked to the idea of “humanity”:

The ‘concept of humanity’ is an especially useful instrument of imperialist expansion, and in its ethical-humanitarian form it is a

16. Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* [1927] (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1976), 53.

17. Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum* [1950] (New York: Telos Press, 2003), 243-244.

18. Cf. Alain de Benoist, *Beyond Human Rights: Defending Freedoms* (London: Arkos Media, 2011).

19. Benoist extensively develops this argument in *Carl Schmitt Today*.

specific vehicle of economic imperialism. [...] [W]hoever invokes humanity wants to cheat.²⁰

Ethnic Democracy

The clear distinction between different ethnocultural identities also constitutes the background for the particular pro-democratic pathos to be found among proponents of the New Right. This pathos is not directed towards liberal representative democracy (denounced by Benoist as bureaucratic sham democracy held hostage by economic and political elites), but towards “participatory” or “direct” democracy. For Benoist, the precondition of direct democracy is ethnocultural homogeneity:

The closer the members of a community are to one another, the more likely they are to have common sentiments, identical values, and the same way of viewing the world and social ties, and the easier it is for them to make collective decisions concerning the common good without the need for any form of mediation.²¹

Benoist astutely emphasizes that the Athenian democracy – also a fundamental point of reference for liberal intellectuals – was, strictly speaking, an ethnic democracy.²² Consequently, we find the New Right’s promotion of direct democracy going hand in hand with ethnical and cultural discrimination.

Also in this instance, the influence of Schmitt is evident. Despite his polemics against liberal individualism and parliamentarianism Schmitt, too, did not renounce the idea of democracy as such. For Schmitt, however, democracy is not characterized by parties, parliamentarianism, the primacy of law and the separation of power, but by the identity of government and governed, and this identity can take on forms quite different from liberal ideals. Accordingly, Schmitt insists in *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* that both “Bolshevism and Fascism [...] are like all dictatorships certainly antiliberal but not necessarily antidemocratic.”²³ True democracy, for Schmitt, “requires [...] first homogeneity and second – if the need arises – elimination or eradication

20. Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, 54.

21. Alain de Benoist, *The Problem of Democracy* (London: Arktos Media, 2011), 28. Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 9.

22. According to the Periclean citizenship law from 451 BC only those can become citizens of Athens who were born of an Athenian mother and father.

23. Schmitt, *Parliamentary Democracy*, 16.

of heterogeneity.”²⁴ It “demonstrates its political power” precisely “by knowing how to refuse or keep at bay something foreign and unequal that threatens its homogeneity.”²⁵

Metapolitics

At a strategic level, the main innovation of Benoist and the “Nouvelle Droite” resides in its emphasis on the importance of a “metapolitical” struggle for cultural hegemony. Proponents of the New Right move away from ideas of a violent revolt against the existing liberal order; instead they give priority to the “ideological work” in the field of “culture.” Here, Benoist surprisingly follows the lead of the Italian Marxist Gramsci who in the 1920s insisted that it would not be enough for the Marxist revolution to take control only of the means of production; it would be necessary to win the hearts and minds of the people, too, in order to redirect the “common sense” towards the desired transition.²⁶ The means of this struggle range from academic, artistic, and journalistic work to forms of protest in the public space. New Right groups like *Casa Pound* in Italy or the Identitarian Movement in France, Austria, and Germany are inspired by this perspective.²⁷ Benoist refers to the metapolitical engagement as the patient work of termites undermining the very foundations of liberal society from within.²⁸ As a result, the new order, Benoist asserts, will arrive eventually not with a “grand soir,” but through an implosion of the exhausted liberal order. The end of liberalism will then be accompanied by “the appearance of thousands of auroras, i.e., the birth of sovereign spaces liberated from the domination of the modern.”²⁹

Although the main point of reference for Benoist’s considerations on “metapolitics” is Gramsci, the importance of the struggle for hegemony in the field of “concepts and words” can also be found prominently in the work of Schmitt. With regard to what Schmitt perceived as a new form of US-imperialism in the period after World War I, he stated:

It is one of the most important phenomena in the entire legal life of humanity that whoever has real power is also able to appropriate and

24. Schmitt, *Parliamentary Democracy*, 9.

25. *Ibid.*

26. Cf. Alain de Benoist, “Die kulturelle Macht,” in *id.*, *Kulturrevolution von rechts: Gramsci und die Nouvelle Droite* (Krefeld: Sinus, 1985), 39-52.

27. Cf. Julian Bruns, Kathrin Glösel and Natascha Strobl, *Die Identitären: Handbuch zur Jugendbewegung der Neuen Rechten in Europa* (Münster: Unrast, 2017), 244-285.

28. Cf. Benoist, “Die kulturelle Macht,” 50-51.

29. Cf. Benoist and Champetier, “French New Right.”

determine concepts and words. *Caesar dominus et super grammaticam*: the emperor is ruler over grammar as well. [...] It is an expression of true political power if a great people [can] determine on its own the forms of speech and even the mode of thought of other peoples, the vocabulary, the terminology and the concepts.³⁰

3. *New Right Paganism*

From a theological perspective, it is interesting to examine how said aspects of Benoist's work are explicitly linked to certain (illiberal) religious options. Yet, in contrast to most other far- and extreme-right parties in Europe, which tend to ground their identity politics on some form of identitarian Christendom (like the *Rassemblement National* in France, the FIDESZ in Hungary, the conservative PiS in Poland or the United Russia in Russia), and in contrast also to Carl Schmitt, who regarded his position as essentially Catholic,³¹ Benoist opts for of revival of paganism. The reason being that Benoist considers Christianity so deeply imbued with a liberal spirit that erecting new right politics on a Christian foundation would represent a *contradictio in adiecto*. As a matter of fact, for Benoist, Judeo-Christianity is not only intrinsically linked to liberalism, it has to be regarded as the genuine historical origin of liberalism itself.

To prove his point, Benoist cites a vast amount of literature from both theological and religious studies.³² He refers to Friedrich Gogarten (1887-1967) and Max Weber (1864-1920) to emphasize that the disenchantment of the world eventually allowing for the capitalist commodification of goods is not an invention of modernity, but can already be found in the biblical distinction between *ens creans* and *ens creatum*.³³ Similar to Jan Assmann,³⁴ Benoist denounces the intolerance essential to biblical monotheism (and later carried on by the "ideology of human rights") that claims that there is one and only one truth for the whole

30. Carl Schmitt, "Forms of Modern Imperialism in International Law" [1933], in *Spatiality, Sovereignty and Carl Schmitt: Geographies of the Nomos*, ed. Stephen Legg (London: Routledge, 2011), 44.

31. In his diary Schmitt declared: "This is the secret key of my entire intellectual and public existence: the struggle for the true catholic intensification." Carl Schmitt, *Glossarium: Aufzeichnungen der Jahre 1947-1951* (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1991), 165.

32. Cf. Benoist's extensive study *On Being a Pagan* (Atlanta, GA: Ultra 2004) and his contribution "Paganische Sakralität und Jüdisch-Christliche Entsakralisierung der Welt," in *Welche Religion für Europa? Ein Gespräch über die Religiöse Identität der Völker*, ed. Demetrios Theraios (Vienna: Peter Lang, 1992), 41-86.

33. Cf. Benoist, "Paganische Sakralität," 42-44.

34. Cf. Jan Assmann, *The Price of Monotheism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

world and does not hesitate to resort to violence for its implementation. For Benoist, it is the biblical universalism which leads to the eradication of differences symbolized in the classical plurality of ethnic and regional gods. The social criticism of the biblical prophets, according to Benoist, prepared the grounds for liberal egalitarianism, while the seeds of the principles of the primacy of right and the separation of powers would already be present in the Book of Judges.³⁵ In medieval theology one would find the roots of liberal rationalism.³⁶

Seen from this perspective, for Benoist the consumerist liberal nihilism is nothing else but a logical consequence: Judeo-Christian tradition's inner fulfilment.³⁷ In contrast to theologians like Friedrich Gogarten and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who also recognized the biblical roots of modern secularization processes yet interpreted "secularization" as legitimate emancipation from religious tutelage, Benoist considers the liberal era as a gradual decline into decadence. He consequently advocates a radical break with the Jewish-Christian heritage. "[T]he language of twenty centuries of Judeo-Christian egalitarianism,"³⁸ for Benoist, has to be overcome in order to prepare the advent of a fundamental spiritual, social, and political renewal, whereby the character of this change is expressed in a clearly Nietzschean imaginary:

We wish to oppose Faith to Law, mythos to logos, the innocence of becoming to the guilt of the created being, the legitimacy of the will that leans toward power to the exaltation of servitude and humility, and man's autonomy to his dependency. We value desire over pure reason, life above its problematic, the image over the concept, the place over exile, the desire for history over the end of history and the will that transforms and says 'yes' to the world over negativity and refusal.³⁹

Benoist's move to neo-paganism is particularly interesting, as his choice of paganism – in contrast to an often criticized strategy utilised by far-right positions – is not based on any kind of essentialist argument. Although Benoist makes considerable efforts to ground his option for paganism in theological and religious studies, he seems clearly aware that opposing an allegedly tolerant, plural, and life-affirming paganism to a supposedly intolerant, totalitarian, and life-negating Judeo-Christianity does not lack a certain kind of artificiality. Far from hiding the subjective

35. Cf. Benoist, *On Being a Pagan*, 128-130.

36. Cf. Benoist, "Paganische Sakralität," 50-54.

37. Cf. *ibid.*, 55-56.

38. Benoist, *On Being a Pagan*, 201.

39. *Ibid.*

dimension of his preference for paganism, he turns this subjectivism into the very centre of his argument: He maintains that

the initial decision [for either Judeo-Christianity or paganism] remains a matter of choice – a choice that can never completely demonstrate the necessity of its own postulates. Nothing spares us from making this choice [...]. It is in the full awareness of this calling that our human status resides. Subjectivity, therefore, does not have to hide away because it is subjective – in fact this is precisely where it finds its strength.⁴⁰

At this point, Benoist's neopaganism paradoxically meets again with Schmitt's political theology, for one of Schmitt's main concerns resides exactly in the endeavour to demonstrate the non-deducibility of political (and theological) decision from any normative assumptions. "Decision, normatively, is born from nothingness," Schmitt declares in his *Political Theology*,⁴¹ and although this statement is primarily directed towards the legal positivism of Hans Kelsen (1881-1973) – one of Schmitt's main adversaries in the field of legal theory –, it is obvious that for Schmitt no clear frontier between legal and theological questions can be drawn: "All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts,"⁴² he affirms famously at the beginning of the third chapter of *Political Theology*.

III. Reading Schmitt "from the left" – Chantal Mouffe and the Politics of Anti-Foundationalism

Benoist's reading of Schmitt clearly represents a reading from the (far) right. During the last decades, however, there have also been attempts made to read Schmitt from a "left" perspective. The Belgian political philosopher Chantal Mouffe is today one of the most prominent thinkers

40. Benoist, *On Being a Pagan*, 2-3. This emphasis on subjectivity corresponds perfectly with the way in which Benoist understands the work of national and religious myths. In an article he wrote for the Journal *Telos*, Benoist argues that national and religious myths hardly ever reflect historical realities but constitute expressions of "prestigious interpretations or perfectly arbitrary and idealistic projections." This, however, would not mean that myths do not have an important function in the life of their respective groups: "The myth works not although it is a myth, but because it is a myth. A belief might well be false as far as its object is concerned, but it becomes 'true' because of what it brings up in the individual or the group [...]." Alain de Benoist, "On Identity," *Telos: Critical Theory of the Contemporary* 128 (Summer 2004): 9-64, 23.

41. Cf. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* [1922] (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 31-32.

42. *Ibid.*, 36.

of a Schmitt-inspired left.⁴³ The aim of the following part is not to give an extensive overview of Mouffe's thinking but to examine whether and, if so, to what extent a "left" or "liberal" reading of Schmitt's decisionism, that is a reading of Schmitt which does *not* contradict the basic principles of a plural democracy is possible. The position of Mouffe is taken here as a prime example of such an effort. I will, first, sketch the context and background of Mouffe's reading of Schmitt. Second, I will focus on Mouffe's attempt to "think both with Schmitt and against Schmitt," thereby examining the overlaps and differences between Benoist's and Mouffe's reading of Schmitt. Third, I will take a look at the role Mouffe attaches to religious and theological considerations.

1. Context and Background

Mouffe's reading of Schmitt is rooted in her attempts to reformulate "left" politics in a non-essentialist way. The general outlines of this project can already be found in "Hegemony and Socialist Strategy," a book Mouffe published together with Ernesto Laclau in 1985.⁴⁴

The book starts with the diagnosis that Marxist theorization has reached an "impasse"⁴⁵ both for its internal theoretical limitations as for its incapacity to adequately respond to the new social movements which increasingly mark the field of social struggles since the 1960s. Contemporary Marxism is thereby criticized especially for giving "ontological centrality" to the "working class," for assuming "'universal' subjects," "historical necessity" and "History in the singular," and for understanding "society" as an intelligible structure that could be [...] reconstituted as a rational, transparent order, through a founding act of a political character.⁴⁶ Against these "illusory" presumptions, Laclau and Mouffe – in an intense dialogue with post-structuralist positions – develop a "post-Marxist" perspective centred around Antonio Gramsci's notion of "hegemony," which would be of crucial importance to grasp and

43. Other important "left-Schmittian" thinkers are Gopal Balakrishnan ('1966) and Andreas Kalyvas ('1967). Cf. Matthew G. Specter, "What's 'Left' in Schmitt? From Aversion to Appropriation in Contemporary Political Theory," in *The Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt*, ed. Jens Meierhenrich and Oliver Simons (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 426-454. Beside a "left" there is also a "liberal" reception of Schmitt. Cf. Hermann Lübke, "Carl Schmitt liberal rezipiert," in *Complexio Oppositorum: Über Carl Schmitt*, ed. Helmut Quaritsch (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1988), 427-440.

44. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).

45. Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 2014), viii.

46. *Ibid.*, xxii.

articulate the struggles for social domination in an era riddled with substantial ontological foundations:

[T]he expansion and determination of the social logic implicit in the concept of ‘hegemony’ [...] will provide us with an *anchorage* from which contemporary social struggles are *thinkable* in their specificity, as well as permitting us to outline a new politics for the Left based upon the project of a radical democracy.⁴⁷

With regard to the focus of this article, it is of special interest that Laclau and Mouffe closely link the concept of “hegemony” to the Derridean notion of “undecidability” and the necessity of underivable “decision”: “[S]tructural undecidability is the very condition of hegemony,” they write in the preface to the second edition of “Hegemony and Socialist Strategy.”⁴⁸ And:

[O]ne can see hegemony as a theory of the decision taken in an undecidable terrain. Deeper levels of contingency require hegemonic [...] articulations, which is another way of saying that the moment of reactivation means nothing other than retrieving an act of political institution that finds its source and motivation nowhere but in itself.⁴⁹

While in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* references to Carl Schmitt are completely missing, this changes in Mouffe’s following books, where Schmitt turns into a central reference point for articulating the necessity of decision in the field of structural undecidability. This goes hand in hand with Mouffe’s shifting focus after the end of the “cold war.” Was the main object of critique in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* contemporary Marxist theory, since the 90s, Mouffe’s criticism appears to be increasingly directed towards representatives of “new labour” and a “third way”-left who, according to Mouffe, posit the end of the allegedly out-dated dichotomies between “left” and “right” in favour of a “consensus at the centre”⁵⁰ and propagate a “social-democratic variant of neo-liberalism.”⁵¹ Mouffe criticizes such positions (among which she includes politicians such as Tony Blair [°1953] and Gerhard Schröder [°1944] but also theorists like Anthony Giddens [°1938] and Ulrich Beck [1944-2015]) for eventually accepting the hegemony of the neo-liberal model, for regarding political antagonisms and collective identities as residues of an archaic past, not appropriate to the processes of political

47. Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, xxiii.

48. *Ibid.*, xii.

49. *Ibid.*, xi.

50. Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London: Verso, 2018), 4.

51. Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005),

63. Mouffe quotes here Stuart Hall.

decision making in the era of “reflexive modernity,” and for the “sacralization of consensus,”⁵² individualism and rationality.

Far from promoting a “democratization of democracy,”⁵³ for Mouffe such positions would lead to a “growing disaffection with politics and a drastic fall in participation in elections,”⁵⁴ the reason for this being a severe misunderstanding of the fundamental antagonistic character of the “political” and a lack of real political alternatives. It is exactly this political conjuncture, in which, according to Mouffe, the thinking of Carl Schmitt can offer “crucial insights for an adequate understanding of the political.”⁵⁵

2. *Anti-Foundationalism and the Attempt to “Think both with Schmitt and against Schmitt”*

Mouffe’s engagement with Schmitt is reflected in a number of publications. Already the title of her book *The Return of the Political* published in 1993⁵⁶ can be interpreted as a reference to Schmitt.⁵⁷ Several of the articles collected in this volume revolve around a dialogue with Schmitt. Since then, the thinking of Schmitt plays an important role in nearly all of Mouffe’s works, being especially evident in the anthology on *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*⁵⁸ (1999) and in her books *On the Political* (2005), *Agonistics* (2013) and *For a Left Populism* (2018).⁵⁹

In her discussion of Schmitt’s oeuvre, Mouffe is clearly aware of Schmitt’s historical ties with National Socialism. Nonetheless, this does not prevent her from regarding Schmitt – in a somehow exaggerated manner – as one of the “most brilliant and intransigent opponents” of the “liberal democratic regime,”⁶⁰ as an “adversary of remarkable intellectual quality”⁶¹ and a theorist “at the centre of this century’s intellectual life”⁶² whose criticisms would be “still pertinent” and of crucial importance for “grasping the weak points in the dominant conception of modern

52. Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, xv.

53. Mouffe, *On the Political*, 48.

54. *Ibid.*, 63.

55. *Ibid.*, 4.

56. Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 1993).

57. Cf. Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*.

58. *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London: Verso, 1999).

59. Mouffe, *On the Political*; ead., *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013); ead., *For a Left Populism*.

60. Mouffe, *Return of the Political*, 118.

61. Chantal Mouffe, “Introduction: Schmitt’s Challenge,” in *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, 1-6, 1.

62. *Ibid.*

democracy.”⁶³ This, of, course, does not mean that Mouffe follows Schmitt in his attacks against “liberal democracy” as such. Her intention is, as Mouffe herself puts it, to use Schmitt’s criticisms in order to fundamentally “rethink liberal democracy with a view to strengthening its institutions.”⁶⁴ In this sense, Mouffe attempts to “think both *with* and *against* Schmitt.”⁶⁵

a) *Thinking with Schmitt...*

Mouffe adopts Schmittian positions with regard to the following aspects:

Criticism of (Liberal) Universalism and Cosmopolitanism

Mouffe uses Schmitt’s reflections in *The Nomos of the Earth*⁶⁶ and *Theory of the Partisan*⁶⁷ to draw attention to the mechanisms and the dangers of a unipolar world order ruled by a sole superpower. According to Mouffe, Schmitt would be especially useful to analyse how the liberal universalism and cosmopolitanism with its “humanitarian rhetoric”⁶⁸ functions ultimately as a “vehicle of economic imperialism”⁶⁹ identifying the “universally good and common interests of humanity”⁷⁰ with the particular interests of a specific country. In such circumstances, every form of opposition against the hegemonic order would not only appear as opposition against a specific political entity, but as threatening humanity and civilization as such: “The opponent is no longer called enemy, but becomes a breaker and disturber of peace, hors la loi and hors la humanité.”⁷¹ Like Benoit, Mouffe, too, emphasizes that since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, these reflections of Schmitt “have become more relevant than ever.”⁷² As alternative to this kind of neo-imperialism Mouffe proposes Schmitt’s model of a “pluriverse,” that is a multipolar world order based on the existence of “several autonomous regional blocs” (e.g. China, Latin-America, the Islamic World etc.).⁷³

63. Mouffe, *Return of the Political*, 118.

64. Mouffe, “Introduction,” 1.

65. *Ibid.*, 6.

66. See note 17.

67. Carl Schmitt, *Theory of the Partisan: Intermediate Commentary on the Concept of the Political* [1963] (New York: Telos Press, 2007).

68. Mouffe, “Introduction,” 2.

69. Mouffe, *On the Political*, 78.

70. *Ibid.*, 79.

71. Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, 79.

72. Mouffe, *On the Political*, 80.

73. Cf. *ibid.*, 115-118.

Against Individualism and the "Sacralisation" of Consensus

Mouffe also adopts Schmitt's criticism of liberal individualism and rationalism as well as his polemics against the liberal search for political "consensus." She repeatedly refers to Schmitt's allegation that due to its excessive focus on the individual, liberalism would reduce politics either to ethics or economics:

In a very systematic fashion liberal thought evades or ignores state and politics and moves instead in a typical, always recurring polarity of two heterogeneous spheres, namely ethics and economics, intellect and trade, education and property. The critical distrust of state and politics is easily explained by the principles of a system whereby the individual must remain *terminus a quo* and *terminus ad quem*.⁷⁴

Consequently, individualism and liberalism would be blind to the central role of affection and collective identities while at the same time overestimating or even "sacralizing"⁷⁵ the importance of dialogue and consensus. Mouffe does not hesitate to apply Schmitt's polemics against "bourgeois liberalism" as the political utopia of the "discussing class"⁷⁶ to the models of democratic deliberation developed by Jürgen Habermas, Richard Rorty⁷⁷ and John Rawls.⁷⁸ She insists that the search for political reconciliation through dialogue and rational consensus is, even when understood only as "regulative idea" as Habermas does, not only "conceptually mistaken, it is fraught with political dangers"⁷⁹: "Too much emphasis on consensus [...] leads to apathy and to a disaffection with political participation."⁸⁰

Constitutive Political Antagonism

The most important aspect Mouffe adopts from Schmitt is his understanding of the "political" as constituted by an unavoidable distinction between friend and enemy,⁸¹ which would define the sphere of the political as marked by an irresolvable antagonism between "us" and "them":

I submit that Schmitt's emphasis on the ever present possibility of the friend/enemy distinction and the conflictual nature of politics

74. Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, 70. Cf. Chantal Mouffe, "Carl Schmitt and the Paradox of Liberal Democracy," in *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, 38-53, 44; ead., *On the Political*, 11; ead., *Return of the Political*, 33; 110; 122-123.

75. Cf. Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, xv.

76. Cf. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 59. Schmitt takes the term "discussing class" from the counterrevolutionary Spanish philosopher and diplomat Juan Donoso Cortés (1809-1853).

77. Cf. Mouffe, *On the Political*, 83-89.

78. Mouffe, *Return of the Political*, 41-57.

79. Mouffe, *On the Political*, 2.

80. Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 7.

81. "The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy" (Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, 26).

constitutes the necessary starting point for envisaging the aims of democratic politics. Only by acknowledging ‘the political’ in its antagonistic dimension can we pose the central question for democratic politics.⁸²

Accepting the ineradicability of antagonism for Mouffe also means to accept with Schmitt the necessity to establish “frontiers” and to determine “a space of inclusion/exclusion,”⁸³ in short to define an “adversary.”⁸⁴ For Mouffe, democracy does therefore not presuppose overcoming the basic antagonism in society (through consensus or dialogue), but in contrast has to be regarded as having in this antagonism its *sine qua non*.

At this point, it is instructive to point to some of the astonishing overlaps between Benoist’s and Mouffe’s reading of Schmitt: 1. Both combine their reading of Schmitt with Gramsci’s concept of hegemony. 2. Both emphasize the importance of “clear and strong” collective identities. 3. Both are aware of the fact that these identities are not “essentially given” but have to be constructed through discursive political processes. 4. Both stress the relevance of the affective dimensions in the constitution of collective identities (in *For a Left Populism*, Mouffe encourages the “left” to make use of the “strong libidinal investment at work in national [...] forms of identification”⁸⁵ and defends the figure of the “charismatic leader”⁸⁶ as a legitimate way of generating affective identification). 5. Benoist and Mouffe adopt Schmitt’s polemics against liberalism, individualism and rationalism as well as against consensus, discussion and deliberation. 6. Both follow Schmitt to criticize the “humanitarian” camouflage of the unipolar “universe” under the hegemony of the US and instead propagate Schmitt’s “pluriverse” constituted by a balance between various autonomous regional powers. 7. Both adopt Schmitt’s understanding of the political as constituted by an ineradicable distinction between “us” and “them” and maintain that the distinction between both is not pre-given but has to be drawn through an autonomous act of decision.

b) ... against Schmitt

The crucial move Mouffe introduces – against Schmitt’s own intentions – into Schmitt’s theoretical framework lies in her attempt to transform

82. Mouffe, *On the Political*, 13-14. Mouffe even suggests that “[b]y bringing to the fore the relational nature of political identities” Schmitt has anticipated “several currents of thought, such as post-structuralism [...]” Ibid., 14.

83. Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 14.

84. Ibid., 18.

85. Mouffe, *Left Populism*, 71.

86. Ibid., 70.

the Schmittian antagonism between “friend” and “enemy” into a somehow more “tamed”⁸⁷ form of opposition which allows for the existence of plurality not only on the level of nations and cultures (as in Schmitt’s pluriverse) but also *within* the nation state itself:

[T]he specificity of democratic politics is not the overcoming of the we/they opposition but the different way in which it is established. What democracy requires is drawing the we/they distinction in a way which is compatible with the recognition of the pluralism which is constitutive of modern democracy.⁸⁸

Mouffe calls this “tamed” or “sublimated”⁸⁹ form of antagonism “agonism.” In such an opposition, the “other” is no longer the “enemy” who ultimately questions my existence as such but the “adversary” “whose ideas might be fought, [...] but whose right to defend those ideas is not to be questioned.”⁹⁰ Democratic agonism, however, presupposes a common acknowledgment of fundamental democratic principles, that would make it possible to resolve rationally irresolvable conflicts in a non-violent way. Among these democratic principles Mouffe counts the separation of powers, free elections, the institutions of representative democracy, and democratic values such as liberty and equality for all. Although the concrete interpretation of these principles are considered to be the object of hegemonic struggles between rivalling groups, Mouffe emphasizes that there has to be, at least, a “conflictual consensus”⁹¹ that these elements constitute the fundamental reference points of a shared “symbolic space.”⁹² Those who question these basic principles as such would have left the conflictual consensus of liberal democracy behind and would consequently have to be regarded as the “enemies” of liberal democratic society in the Schmittian sense.⁹³

Up to this point, Mouffe’s attempt to “think both with Schmitt against Schmitt” is convincing. The problem of Mouffe’s position, however, becomes apparent, when – in an act that carries her anti-rationalist approach to the extreme – Mouffe denies the possibility of founding the “conflictual consensus,” which is supposed to guarantee the very possibility of a pluralist democracy, on any kind of rational or moral argument. In an explicit contrast to John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, Mouffe

87. Cf. Mouffe, *On the Political*, 20.

88. *Ibid.*, 14.

89. Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 8.

90. *Ibid.*, 7.

91. Mouffe, *On the Political*, 121.

92. *Ibid.*, 20.

93. Cf. Mouffe, *Return of the Political*, 4.

asserts that “our [that is the liberal-democratic Western] allegiance to democratic values and institutions is not based on their superior rationality”⁹⁴ but the result of a political decision, which cannot be derived from any kind of rationality or moral norms.⁹⁵

At this point, the aporias of a radical decisionist position clearly come to the fore, especially when contrasted with Benoist’s new right decisionism: If the “conflictual consensus” which allows for the unfolding of social antagonisms in a peaceful space appears to be itself grounded in a political decision that cannot be justified, neither rationally nor morally, then there seems to be no reason left why new right movements and parties themselves should not legitimately propose other non-liberal, non-egalitarian principles to live by. Following Mouffe’s line of thought, the option for liberal democratic principles cannot be considered more rational or legitimate than an option for illiberal ones. Ultimately, the process of constructing political identities then becomes short-circuited into the formula: “We are whoever we (or I) decide that we are.”⁹⁶

3. *Anti-Foundationalism and Christianity*

In contrast to Schmitt and Benoist, Mouffe hardly ever brings her decisionist approach into dialogue with theology or religion. There are, however, a few exceptions, which interestingly point into opposing directions: While in the introduction to “Hegemony and Socialist Strategy,” Laclau and Mouffe affirm that “[p]olitical conclusions similar to those set forth in this book could have been approximated from very different discursive formations – for example, from certain forms of Christianity [...],”⁹⁷ in “The Return of the Political,” Mouffe identifies precisely Schmitt’s inability to separate his analysis of liberal democracy from a theological framework as the fundamental reason why Schmitt – despite

94. Mouffe, *On the Political*, 121.

95. Alongside this decisionist argument we find a culturalist one, when Mouffe affirms that “liberal democratic principles can be defended only as being constitutive of our [!] form of life” (ibid.).

96. These consequences could easily be avoided, if the decisionist position is not carried to extremes. Cf. in this regard Michael Hölzl, who differentiates between a “radical decisionism” and a “normative” or “responsible decisionism,” the latter being characterized by embedding the decisionist moment in a kind of “weak” normative framework. Cf. Michael Hölzl, *Decisionism and Political Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2019, forthcoming).

97. Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, xxiii. It remains open, however, to which forms of Christianity Laclau and Mouffe refer.

of his perspicacious criticisms – remains ultimately “blind”⁹⁸ to the nature of modern politics:

What appears as modern politics [for Schmitt] is merely [...] a transformation of theological concepts and attitudes for non-religious ends. [...] The idea that, since the democratic revolution, we are on wholly different ground, [...] which demands that we conceive democracy in a modern way, making room for pluralism, is, for Schmitt, strictly unthinkable.⁹⁹

In order to overcome this limitation of Schmitt’s understanding of the “modern,” Mouffe adopts Hans Blumenberg’s (1920-1996) defense of the “legitimacy,” that is the true novelty and independence of the modern age from any theological heritage.¹⁰⁰ Anti-foundationalism and pluralism thereby appear as the latest and most radical results of the Enlightenment’s struggle to free itself from the burdens of (theological) tradition:

This illusion of providing itself with its own foundations, which accompanied the labour of liberation from theology carried out by the Enlightenment may therefore be recognized as such without calling into question [...] self-assertion. It is when it acknowledges its limitations, and when it completely comes to terms with pluralism and accepts the impossibility of total control and final harmony, that modern reason frees itself from its premodern heritage [...].¹⁰¹

Seen from this perspective, any attempt to ground Mouffe’s anti-foundational position on some sort of theological considerations would constitute a betrayal of modernity.¹⁰²

IV. Carl Schmitt and the Question of a Catholic Decisionism

As we have seen above, Benoist links his adoption of a Schmitt-inspired decisionism to neopaganism while Mouffe tends to distance her approach from any theological heritage. From a Christian perspective, however, the question remains, if a radical decisionist position (as defended by Benoist, Mouffe and Schmitt) is compatible with a Christian standpoint. To examine this question, I will turn back to Schmitt himself who

98. Cf. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, 121.

99. Ibid.

100. Cf. Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983); Mouffe, *Return of the Political*, 123-124.

101. Mouffe, *Return of the Political*, 124.

102. In contrast to Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau frequently refers to theological texts and figures in his writings. To analyze the role of theological figures in Laclau, however, would go beyond the scope of this article.

explicitly regarded his position as “catholic.”¹⁰³ The question whether this claim is legitimate or not is not only of historical interest. It is of high topicality at a time in which several representatives of current new or far right movements and parties actively try to combine Benoist’s ideological framework with a Christian narrative.¹⁰⁴

In the following, I will, first, examine the link Schmitt tries to establish between decisionism, sovereignty and the dogma of the infallibility of the pope. Second, I will take a look at some traditional conceptions of divine transcendence which at first glance seem to invite a decisionist reading of transcendence. Focusing on the revelation of the name of YHWH in Ex. 3:14, I will, finally, offer an exemplary reading of divine transcendence, which aims to show that despite of some formal similarities, the sovereignty of the biblical God ultimately withstands any reading in the sense of Schmitt’s decisionism.

1. *Political Sovereignty and Papal Infallibility*

Following his premise that “[a]ll significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts,”¹⁰⁵ in his “Political Theology” Schmitt strives to disclose the inner relatedness of theological conceptions of divine sovereignty with the concept of political sovereignty. The reference to papal infallibility plays a crucial role therein and it does so for two reasons: First, because Schmitt identifies divine sovereignty with the sovereignty of the infallible pope as “the one who in the earthly reality acts as His representative without meeting opposition [...]”¹⁰⁶ And, second, because after most modern states have parted with absolutism and monarchism, Schmitt regards the infallible pope as the institution representing the principle of absolute sovereignty in its highest purity. The inner relatedness Schmitt posits between “decision,” “sovereignty,” and “infallibility” becomes especially apparent when Schmitt cites from Joseph de Maistre’s

103. Cf. footnote 31.

104. Cf. Hans Schelkshorn, “The Ideology of the New Right and Religious Conservatism: Toward an Ethical Critique of the New Politics of Authoritarianism,” *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation* 4, no. 2 (2018): 124-141; and Sebastian Pittl, “Die politische Theologie neurechter Bewegungen,” in *Handbuch der Religionen: Religionen und Glaubensgemeinschaften in Deutschland*, ed. Udo Tworuschka and Michael Klöcker, Supplement 60/2019 (Hohenwarsleben: Westarp Verlagsservicegesellschaft: 2019), 1–14.10.3, 1-27.

105. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36.

106. *Ibid.*, 10. It is noteworthy that Schmitt in his early writing “Die Sichtbarkeit der Kirche” (engl. “The Visibility of the Church”) still distinguished between the obedience to God and the obedience to the pope. Cf. Carl Schmitt, “Die Sichtbarkeit der Kirche: Eine scholastische Erwägung,” *Summa: Eine Vierteljahresschrift* 2 (1917): 71-80, 77. This reservation against papal infallibility disappears in his later writings.

(1753-1821) influential book “Du pape” (1819),¹⁰⁷ in which the French counter-revolutionary identifies “decision” with “sovereignty” and declares infallibility and sovereignty to be “perfectly synonymous”¹⁰⁸:

De Maistre spoke with particular fondness of sovereignty, which essentially meant decision. To him the relevance of the state rested on the fact that it provided a decision, the relevance of the Church on its rendering of the last decision that could not be appealed. Infallibility was for him the essence of the decision that cannot be appealed, and the infallibility of the spiritual order was of the same nature as the sovereignty of the state order. [...] To him, every sovereignty acted as if it were infallible, every government was absolute [...].¹⁰⁹

From a theological perspective, there are at least two objections to be made against Schmitt’s understanding of papal infallibility. First, Schmitt marginalizes all limiting factors established by Vaticanum I that confine the limits of papal infallibility (such as its limitation to matters of faith and morals, the requirement that infallible proclamations must not contradict the Sacred Scripture and Apostolic Tradition and the embedding of the infallibility of the pope into the infallibility of the Church as such). Second, Schmitt ignores the high appreciation Vaticanum I shows for “natural reason” as expressed in the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Filius*, which affirms that

between faith and reason no true dissension can ever exist, since the same God, who reveals mysteries and infuses faith, has bestowed on the human soul the light of reason; moreover, God cannot deny Himself, nor ever contradict truth with truth.¹¹⁰

It is true that Vaticanum I also insists on the subordination of reason to faith. However, for the Council Fathers this does not mean that faith can ignore “reason,” but refers to the permanent task of bringing reason and faith into congruence. This reflects a key concern of Catholic Tradition in general, which has always claimed to hold *fides* and *ratio* together – as Benoist knows well and turns into an argument against Catholicism.

107. Joseph de Maistre, *The Pope: Considered in His Relations with the Church, Temporal Sovereignities, Separated Churches and the Cause of Civilization* [1819] (London: C. Dolman, 1850).

108. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 55.

109. *Ibid.*

110. First Vatican Council, “Dei Filius,” original Latin text in *Henrici Denzinger Enchiridion Symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, ed. Peter Hünermann (Freiburg im Breisgau, Basel, and Vienna: Herder, 2014), 3001-3020, 3017. An English translation is available at: <http://inters.org/Vatican-Council-I-Dei-Filius> [accessed February 28, 2019].

After all, insisting on a “*fides quaerens intellectum*” does not sit well with his choice for radical decisionism.

2. *Christian Decisionism?*

On an even more profound level, not only Schmitt’s reference to papal infallibility but to the Christian tradition as such can be brought into serious question. First, Schmitt’s nearly exclusive focus on the notion of “absolute sovereignty” at the expense of other qualities of the biblical God like “love,” “mercy,” “justice” and others, severely distorts the image the biblical scriptures offer of “YHWH.” Furthermore, already Erik Peterson (1890-1960) in his famous text “Monotheism as political problem” (1935),¹¹¹ which is commonly understood as a reaction against Schmitt’s political theology, criticized all attempts to ground any form of political theology on the foundations of Christianity as betrayal to the Trinitarian profession. Political Theology, for Peterson, would only be possible on the basis of either paganism or Jewish monotheism, while understanding God as Trinity would necessarily imply the destruction of the principle of the sovereignty of a single person (God father, the emperor or the monarch) above all others and therefore lead to the “liquidation” of any political theology. Even more radical is the criticism of Jürgen Manemann (°1963) who in his study on Schmitt strives to prove that Schmitt’s political theology is ultimately grounded in a “gnostic” worldview, which betrays not only the trinitarian profession but the biblical monotheism as such.¹¹²

All of the mentioned criticisms tackle important aspects of a strictly theological criticism of Schmitt worth to be developed in more detail. The question, however, remains what to do with the existing conceptualizations of divine transcendence, which at least at a superficial look seem to indeed invite a decisionist reading of transcendence. In Mouffe’s anthology on “The Challenge of Carl Schmitt,” it is interestingly the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek (°1949) who traces Schmitt’s decisionism back to some of the most outstanding examples in this regard, namely Kierkegaard’s (1813-1855) “leap of faith,” Schelling’s (1775-1854) reflections about the “abyss of divine Will”

111. Erik Peterson, “Monotheism as a Political Problem: A Contribution to the History of Political Theology in the Roman Empire” [1935], in id., *Theological Tractates* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 68-105.

112. Cf. Jürgen Manemann, *Carl Schmitt und die Politische Theologie: Politischer Anti-Monotheismus* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2002), 167-200.

and Descartes' (1596-1650) and Duns Scotus' (1266-1308) theological voluntarism.¹¹³

Žižek, however, thereby reads Scotus' affirmation that "beyond Divine Reason there is the abyss of God's Will, [...] His contingent Decision which sustains even the Eternal Truths"¹¹⁴ already as a specific modern attitude, namely as "the violent gesture of asserting the independence of the abyssal act of free decision from its positive content."¹¹⁵ The threatening irrationalism of this decisionism for Žižek is later echoed also in Descartes' statement that "two plus two would be five if such were God's Will"¹¹⁶ and in Calvinist (and Jansenist) doctrines about predestination, which Žižek interprets in an explicitly Schmittian sense:

[T]he properly modern God is the God of predestination, a kind of Schmittian politician who draws the line of separation between Us and Them, Friends and Enemies, the Saved and the Damned, *by means of a purely formal, abyssal act of decision; without any grounds in the actual properties and acts of those concerned* [...].¹¹⁷

In his reading of Kierkegaard's interpretation of the Binding of Isaac in "Fear and Trembling,"¹¹⁸ Žižek eventually ties this "modern" decisionism back to the biblical tradition itself, namely to the revelation of God's name in Ex. 3:14:

[T]his God is the protoexistentialist God whose existence [...] does not simply coincide with His essence [...] but precedes His essence. For that reason He speaks in tautologies, not only about His own *quidditas* ('I am what I am'), but also, and above all, about what concerns *logos*, the *reasons* for what He is doing – or, more precisely, for His injunctions, for what He is asking us or prohibiting us to do: His inexorable orders are ultimately grounded in an 'It is so BECAUSE I SAY IT IS SO!'.¹¹⁹

With the reference to Ex. 3:14 Žižek perspicaciously grounds his analysis of the theological backgrounds of Schmitt's decisionism in one of the key passages of the biblical texts which at first sight indeed seems to invite a decisionist understanding of God's transcendence. Žižek's reproduction of Ex. 3:14 as "I am what I am" and "It is so because I say it is

113. Slavoy Žižek, "Carl Schmitt in the Age of Post-Politics," in *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, 18-37.

114. *Ibid.*, 20.

115. *Ibid.*, 19-20.

116. *Ibid.*, 26.

117. *Ibid.*, 20.

118. Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* [1843] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

119. Žižek, "Carl Schmitt," 25.

so” represents, however, a highly tendentious reading of this passage, which projects a structure upon the biblical text which a close reading of the verse exposes as highly questionable. In what follows, I will take a closer look at Ex. 3:14 and show how, despite its formal similarities, the revelation of God’s name in Ex. 3:14 ultimately withstands a reading in decisionist terms.

3. “I will be who I will be” (Ex. 3:14) – Decision, Identity and the Name of YHWH

The revelation of God’s name in Ex. 3:14 certainly represents a key passage of the biblical scriptures. However, there exists a controversy about the correct translation and the exact significance of the “*’ehyeh ’āšer ’ehyeh*” with which YHWH answers to Moses’ request for his name. While some understand the sentence as a statement about God’s ontological nature (in the sense of “I am who am” or “I am he who is” – Žižek’s “I am what I am” also points in this direction), others read it as “I cause to be what I cause to be” or “I am because I am” – pointing to God’s quality as the creator of the cosmos and *causa sui*. A third line of interpretation reads “I am who I am” as a refusal to answer Moses’s question as expressed, for example, in the translation “I am who I am, and never you mind.” A fourth, finally, points to God’s absolute sovereignty fully independent of any need to legitimize itself – this is the dimension Žižek emphasizes when he reads God’s name in the sense of “It is so because I say it is so.”¹²⁰

A closer look at the biblical verse and especially at the narrative context into which it is embedded, however, unveils that the name *’ehyeh ’āšer ’ehyeh* resists being read in terms of such a decisionist self-affirmation. This becomes evident, when we take into account that the revelation of God’s name is situated within the narrative of Moses’ encounter with God in the burning bush at mount Horeb, where God tells Moses that “he” has heard the cry of the people of Israel and sends Moses to free Israel from their sufferings through exploitation in Egypt. That Moses is chosen for this complicated mission is quite astonishing as Moses appears not only to be extremely shy but is also a prime example of a hybrid and highly precarious identity: Moses is

120. For a general overview of different interpretations of Ex. 3:14 in modern exegesis cf. Werner H. Schmidt, “Der Jahwe-name und Ex 3,14,” in *Textgemäß: Aufsätze und Beiträge zur Hermeneutik des Alten Testaments*, ed. Antonius H. Gunneweg and Otto Kaiser (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997), 123-138.

the son of Hebrews, yet he bears an Egyptian name. He was brought up by a nurse who is his own mother and by the daughter of the Pharaoh. After murdering an Egyptian in an attempt to defend a Hebrew slave, he is forced to abandon Egypt, his second homeland, too. He flees to Midian, where he marries Zipporah, the daughter of a Midian priest and gives his son the name “Gershom” (“a sojourner there”), “for he said, ‘I have been a sojourner in a foreign land’” (Ex. 2:22). The alienation of Moses is also expressed in the fact that the Book of Exodus tells us next to nothing about his father – something very threatening, if we consider the great importance that “the fathers” have for a Hebrew identity.

It therefore does not lack a certain irony that God addresses Moses “the Egyptian” (Ex. 2:19) as the God “of his father” (Ex. 3:6). Taking into account Moses’ own background, it is not surprising that such a paternal “identification” of God does not seem to satisfy Moses. His subsequent question: “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you’, and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” in Ex. 3:13 can be understood as expression of Moses’ desire for a more fixable identity on which to safely ground the authority of his God given mission. God’s answer “I will be who I will be,” however, forgoes any such substantial identification. Nonetheless, it does not ignore Moses’ anxiety to find something to which to hold on to either. In this regard, “I will be who I will be” can be understood not so much as the affirmation of sovereign transcendence (in the sense of: “I will be whoever I decide to be”) but as promise of unconditional loyalty (in the sense of: “I will be there for you in whatever forms may be necessary in the future”). For such an interpretation there can be listed a number of arguments: First, most modern biblical scholars regard the *’ehyeh ’äšer ’ehyeh* as a futurum.¹²¹ Second, the interpretation of “I will be who I will be” in terms of “I will be there for you” or “I will be with you” corresponds to rabbinic tradition.¹²² Third, such an interpretation fits well into the whole narration revolving around YHWH’s salvific presence and fidelity to Israel.¹²³

121. Cf. Georg Fischer and Dominik Markl, *Das Buch Exodus* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2009), 54-55.

122. Cf. Jürgen Ebach, “Gottes Name(n),” *Bibel und Kirche* 65, no. 2 (2010): 62-67, 64; Daniel Krochmalnik, *Schriftauslegung: Das Buch Exodus im Judentum* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2000), 44.

123. Christoph Dohmen, *Exodus 1–18* (Freiburg im Breisgau, Basel, and Vienna: Herder, 2015), 158-160.

Conclusion

In the light of the revelation of God's name in Ex. 3:14 we encounter the baselines of an understanding of Judeo-Christian "identity" which effectively resists the identitarian temptation manifest in Schmitt's and Benoist's decisionism. God's promise in Ex. 3:14 "I will be there for you in whatever forms may be necessary" relates the question of God's and Israel's identity to the open field of history of salvation, where God's "presence" is never simply given but unfolds in a dialectical dynamic of presence and absence. To identify the will of God in the often surprising and sometimes even startling events of this history requires a constant hermeneutical work and prudent discernment in the Spirit. To experience the absence of any full and safe identifications like Moses did in Ex. 3:14 not as threat (which has to be eliminated either by essentialist strategies or by radical decisionism) requires trust in God's promise, that is: faith. It is precisely this faith which opens up new ways to confront an uncertain future, to abide the ambiguities of the present and to relate to the past in a non-fundamentalist manner.¹²⁴ The history of Israel can be read as the history of this faith. It is a history which is not free from the temptation to abandon the legacy of God's self-revelation in order to return to a strong, pure and unambiguous identity. The salvific presence of *'ehyeh 'ăšer 'ehyeh*, however, becomes especially apparent in those moments of that history when such temptation is resisted such as in the book of Ruth or the in the parable of the "Good Samaritan" (Luke 10:25-37). Against Schmitt's (and New Right Christian's) attempt to reduce the biblical neighbour to the member of one's own political community,¹²⁵ stories like the "Good Samaritan" exemplify that the God who revealed himself to Moses opens up the possibility of an identity which is not primarily constituted through distinction from the other,

124. As we have seen, Moses is alienated from his origins. The fact that God addresses him as the God of his "father" does not conceal Moses' actual alienation but presents to Moses a new possibility how to relate to his experience of alienation, too. Therein, the continuity between Moses and Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is nothing "naturally grown," nor is it the result of a subjective decision, but it appears to be mediated through Moses' encounter with YHWH.

125. "The often quoted 'Love your enemies' (Matt. 5:44; Luke 6:27) reads 'diligite inimicos vestros,' [...] and not *diligite hostes vestros*. 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" (Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, 29). The "Christian" politics of Orbán and the FIDESZ party in Hungary matches perfectly with this claim. In 2013 the election posters of the (far-right) Austrian Freedom party (FPÖ) read in a similar manner: "Love your neighbour. For us, these are our Austrians."

but by way of inscribing oneself into the Abrahamic vocation of becoming a blessing “for all the families of the earth” (Gen. 12:3). This biblical horizon holds much potential for effectively criticizing both essentialist and decisionist appropriations of the Christian tradition by new right movements and parties.

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