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The modern Epimetheus: Carl Schmitt's katechontism as reactionary chronopolitics

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This paper deals with the reactionary form of chronopolitics that characterizes the work of the German jurist, political theorist, and radical conservative intellectual Carl Schmitt (1888–1985). Called both the latest classic of political thought and the Crown Jurist of the Third Reich, Schmitt remains a controversial figure, not least because of his practical support of the Nazi regime and his authoritarianism. Another controversial aspect of Schmitt's work are his unabashed and outspoken references to theology as a resource for legal and political thought. Many commentators regard Schmitt's support for the Nazi regime, his general authoritarianism, and his recourse to theology as expressions of an apocalyptic worldview that is taken to form the basis for his alleged decisionism. This in turn matches an analysis of twentieth-century totalitarianisms as constituting innerworldly forms of radical millenarian faith. However, the structure of Schmitt's politico-theological reason should be understood in a very different way. Rather than affirming the apocalyptic and millenarian energies of totalitarian movements, Schmitt attempted to formulate a theory aimed at containing them and averting their revolutionary fervor in defense of the state. At the heart of this endeavor was the Biblical figure of the *katechon*, "the restrainer" of the Antichrist and lawlessness as described in the Second Letter to the Thessalonians. Focusing particularly on a short but dense essay published in 1950, the paper lays bare the basis for Schmitt's avertive apocalypticism, or katechontism, which can be regarded as the politico-theological emblem of what Schmitt himself in contrast to decisionism described as concrete order thinking. The form of reactionary chronopolitics Schmitt expresses there is analyzed with the help of theories of modern historical temporality and contextualized through his own references to contemporary conservative thinkers like Hans Freyer, Karl Löwith, and Konrad Weiss.

KEYWORDS

Carl Schmitt, political theology, chronopolitics, apocalypticism, *katechon*, political reaction, decisionism, concrete order thinking

Introduction

How should the reader understand the paraphrasing of Mary Shelley in the title of this paper, rewritten to better suit a man who identified with Prometheus's brother, Epimetheus? As it suggests, Schmitt can be read as a representative of a reactionary stance in relation to the dominant regime of modern historicity. The point is not to claim a broad Schmittian influence on the chronopolitics of the right of the twentieth century, but rather to show his exemplarity in relation to a general position that "stands athwart history, yelling Stop," to use a well-known phrase from William F. Buckley's mission statement for *The National Review* (Buckley, 1955). In developing this line of thought, Schmitt did reflect deeply on the figure of Epimetheus, pondering its significance for his own fate, down to describing himself as a "Christian Epimetheus" (Schmitt, 2002a, p. 12). This self-designation illustrates the importance of theology for Schmitt's view of history and its political implications. This is not a new feature in the discussion of Schmitt, but nevertheless remains an unsettled issue.

Given his confirmed status as a radical conservative of Catholic extraction, one would assume that the reading of Schmitt and his politico-theological understanding of history as inherently reactionary would be widely accepted. It is, however, not. The widespread view of Schmitt as a radical decisionist often comes with an understanding of his political theology that identifies it with a heretical strain of modern Gnosticism, in turn conceived of as deeply revolutionary. In this reading, Schmitt was an essentially apocalyptic thinker, bent on bringing about a bloody decisive battle to secure the promise of salvation in a world increasingly imprisoned by the iron cage of soulless rationality. That stance would ultimately explain his support for the Hitler regime and be the natural expression of his fanatical political mythology of anti-Semitic authoritarianism.

By arguing against this interpretation, this paper aligns itself with an emerging reading of Schmitt that accentuates his tendency toward what he himself described as concrete order thinking, rather than decisionism. What is at stake here is therefore what concrete order thinking amounts to in Schmitt's political theology. But beyond that, I want to suggest that Schmitt's concrete order thinking and its associated political theology can tell us something important about modern chronopolitics and its inheritance more generally, specifically from the view of political reaction.

Schmitt's discussion of the Biblical figure of the *katechon* provides a key to the political theology of concrete order thinking. In what follows, I will particularly focus on a short but dense and highly informative essay published in the journal *Universitas* 1950, "Three Possibilities for a Christian Conception of History," and some of its contexts. Here, Schmitt lays out central aspects of his theology of history in relation to important works by the philosopher Karl Löwith, the sociologist Hans Freyer, and the poet Konrad Weiss, thus situating himself and his earlier work in an ongoing debate on the meaning of historical temporality in modernity.

The aim of this paper is to show how Schmitt straddles the positions of being both an "apocalyptician of the counterrevolution" (Taubes, 1987) and an "arch-realist" (Guilhot, 2017, p. 87), and how such an "apocalyptic realism"—what I will call Schmitt's *katechontism*—corresponds with forms of modern apocalypticist chronopolitics. In doing so, I will contrast Schmitt's chronopolitical stance to related projects and argue against an influential interpretation which casts Schmitt as, in the words of Reinhard Mehring, an "apocalyptic Gnostic" (Mehring, 2021, p. 206). In what follows, I will make the case that while Schmitt was informed by an apocalypticist theology, he was not a Gnostic but a Christian (although of an idiosyncratic kind which needs elucidation), not a (conservative) revolutionary but a reactionary, and that this has implications for how we understand Schmitt's political theory more generally. I will also show that the contrast becomes particularly clear when analyzed in terms of chronopolitics.

This leads to the need for a complex operation of reconstruction. In what follows, I will start out by providing a definition of fundamental terms of analysis—particularly apocalypticism and chronopolitics as vehicles for reactionary thought. Then I present the inherent problems related to designating Schmitt as a decisionist and the politico-theological implications associated with that designation, whereafter I turn to the argument for conceiving of Schmitt as a thinker of concrete order. The rest of the paper is then dedicated to the application of this perspective to a relatively neglected but illustrative and important text of Schmitt's, after which I turn to my concluding thoughts on the implications of my discussion.

Apocalypticism as chronopolitics: Modern progressivism and its discontents

Central to the argument of this paper is that the implications of Schmitt's political theology can be better understood in relationship to a paradigm according to which central aspects of the history of Western politics should be regarded as expressions of secularized religion, often charged with apocalyptic energies. This paradigm expresses itself in different variants, like the idea of totalitarianism as a form of political religion or the conception of the philosophy of progress as a secularized version of Millenarian faith. One could say that the best analysis of this paradigm taken as a whole is found in Hans Blumenberg's *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, where it is subjected to fundamental and devastating critique (Blumenberg, 1983). However, the paradigm seems to have survived Blumenberg and

is still being deployed today (see, for instance, Griffin, 2005; Gentile, 2006; Maier, 2007; Gregor, 2012).

The relation of this paradigm to Schmitt's assertion regarding the secularization of theological concepts in the modern theory of the state is obvious. It is no accident that Blumenberg regarded Schmitt as one of its exponents already in the 1966 edition of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, a part expanded in its second edition (Blumenberg, 1966, p. 60; Blumenberg, 1983, p. 89–102). However, in other versions of the paradigm's iterations, Schmitt has strangely enough rarely been regarded as a theorist belonging to this paradigm, and more as an exponent of the tendency it analyzes. In fact, Schmitt can be described as both belonging to the paradigm and being an exponent of the tendency.

In a recent study of the importance of apocalypticism for modern political thought that applies a version of the aforementioned paradigm, Alison McQueen defines apocalypticism, in both traditionally religious as well as immanent-secular forms, as a "kind of utopianism… premised on the belief in the imminent end of the known world and the arrival of a radically new and better future" (McQueen, 2018, p. 12). She underlines that the apocalyptic end as envisioned in these discourses should be understood as not only "imminent" but also as "cataclysmic" (McQueen, 2018, p. 6, 12). However, even if McQueen's definition is useful as a description of apocalypticist perceptions of temporality, there is reason to believe that apocalypticism can contain much less optimistic perceptions than her description of its "utopianism" suggests.

Apocalypticism and apocalypticist are here taken to signify something beyond the general category of "the apocalyptic", with apocalypticism designating a specific structure of belief regarding the meaning and implication of apocalyptic events and scenarios. Describing something or someone as (an) apocalypticist should thus be understood as belonging to a specific structure of meaning rather than as just concerning apocalyptic ideas in general.

Historians of both premodern and modern apocalypticism have pointed toward the existence of something that can be called "avertive apocalypticism," that is, the idea that an imminent apocalypse can be slowed down or stopped (Wojcik, 2012). Avertive apocalypticism stands in contrast to a catastrophic millennialism or apocalypticism, according to which the end cannot be averted, and in contrast to an avertive millennialism that envisages that an averted apocalypse can be followed by a "progressive" move where a state of fulfillment or harmony is reached as an endpoint to human history (Wessinger, 2014, p. 425; Wojcik, 2012, p. 66, 83–84).

In an observation pertinent for an understanding of the importance of a conception of a specifically avertive apocalypticism, Bernard McGinn has noted that the discussion of apocalypticism tends to be strongly influenced by the perspective established by Norman Cohn in his classic 1957 study *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (McGinn, 1998, p. 32). Cohn, who was something of a Cold War liberal with an outspoken antitotalitarian pathos, did not hesitate to make comparisons between the movements of the high Middle Ages that he himself had studied and the totalitarianism of the twentieth century (Cohn, 1970).

According to Cohn, the belief in the possibility of innerworldly salvation led the millenarian adherents of apocalyptic faiths, premodern as well as modern, to embrace a total remodeling of society (Cohn, 1970, p. 286). Cohn's thoughts on the secularized continuity between medieval apocalypticism and modern totalitarian movements were important for an emerging analysis of millenarianism and quite influential, but Cohn was not alone or completely original in this assumption. Similar ideas were raised by Karl Löwith, to whom I will return shortly since his take on the problem plays an important role for Schmitt, as well as by Eric Voegelin, who already in 1938 had described totalitarian movements as "political religions" (Voegelin, 2000a).

Voegelin would later develop his analysis of the implications of the abiding influence of secularized faith in modern societies by both specifying and generalizing its implications. It was now more specifically the inheritance of ancient Gnosticism that bothered Voegelin, though he no longer saw its effects limited to radical politics but rather expressed everywhere in modern society. Modern Gnosticism's lure to, as Voegelin put it, "immanentize the eschaton" by regarding social conflict as the expression of a sacred Manichean struggle of light and darkness threatened established order with widespread destabilization (Voegelin, 2000b,c).

By following Cohn (and we could probably add Voegelin and other exponents of the paradigm to his list), McGinn argues, one misses the extent to which traditional apocalyptic ideas and visions were held and promoted by a highly placed Christian intelligentsia and served to maintain the Christian institutions of medieval European societies (McGinn, 1998, p. 29). The relevance of McGinn's critical analysis also for modern contexts is supported by McQueen's approach to apocalypticism, which shows the close relation between three representatives of realism in the political canon—Niccolò Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, and Hans Morgenthau—and the history of Western apocalypticism. In contrast to a thinker like Cohn, for whom millenarianism represents a rebellious affect in opposition to order-seeking reason, McQueen claims that a major feature of the thought of these three great realists is that they were able to appropriate apocalyptic themes from their own time and use them in the service of order (McQueen, 2018, p. 14). Thus, it would not be fully misguided to describe their political theories as variants of avertive apocalypticism.

As McQueen points out but does not really elaborate (nor does she use the exact term), apocalypticism has a chronopolitical dimension. In her words, the event that adherents of apocalypticist movements prophesize is thought to emerge as a rupture in "*the apparent temporal continuity*

of history, a revelatory moment around which the past is given meaning and a radically new future is announced" (McQueen, 2018, p. 59, italicized in the original). This means that apocalypticism politicizes temporality by drawing lines between before and after, but also simultaneously between us and them, those who heed the message and those who do not believe. In this way, the very understanding of history acquires acute political stakes, as what we can call the dominance over a regime of historicity is challenged by antagonistic chronopolitical contenders.

The terms chronopolitics and regime of historicity are closely linked. The latter concept was coined by Hartog (2015) and signifies an abstract, formal description of the way a culture orders its perception of historical time, in terms of past, present, and future. The flow of time is thus invested with a specifically historical frame of reference and understanding, something that makes actions possible to legitimate in relation to the inherent logic of an overarching cultural "regime." Hartog's model is quite schematic and describes modernity as dominated by a monolithic regime of "futuristic" historicity. By this, he means a regime oriented toward an open future, which legitimates itself in terms oriented toward future fulfillment, in contrast to more traditional societies that rely on past experiences and references for the understanding of and acting both in the present and in expectation of the coming future.

Christopher Clark has developed Hartog's idea of regimes of historicity as a tool for analysis of historical temporalities but tones down the macro perspective and instead focuses on how certain actors have formulated their political projects in terms of historicity and temporality. By constructing meaning-giving frames and narratives around historical experiences and perceptions of time, political actors can both create an understanding for their own predicament and produce strategies for the exercise of power. Clark describes this as chronopolitics, that is, a politics of temporalities (Clark, 2019, p. 14).

In a way, the two approaches are complementary: a regime of historicity can be regarded as the "constitutional" framework in which different chronopolitical projects are articulated and realized. The analysis oriented toward chronopolitical understanding thus focuses on the resources available to and deployed by various actors. One could, for instance, say that medieval Christendom was dominated by a certain apocalyptic regime of historicity which drew its legitimating strategies from Biblical sources, something that provided actors with tools for specific chronopolitical projects within the frame of Biblically grounded eschatology, some more and some less radical in their interpretations of its social implications.

Following Hartog and Clark, we can analyze modern political projects as being formulated in relation to a futuristic regime of historicity. While Hartog's description of the modern regime of historicity is perhaps most immediately recognizable in established ideas of liberalism and socialism, both conservatives and fascists produced chronopolitical visions that provided alternative framings of the futurist regime. Though fascism's chronopolitics is often envisaged as a revolt against the modern world, it is obvious that today's perhaps most established definition of fascism, the generic approach championed by Roger Griffin, builds on a chronopolitical understanding, as it defines fascism as an ultra-nationalistic palingenetic revolution oriented toward the future rebirth of an imagined past golden age (Griffin, 1991). This melding together of an imagined past with a promised future has become an established view of fascist chronopolitics (see Griffin, 2007; Esposito and Reichardt, 2015), at least in form, even when important details are questioned (for example by Clark, 2019).

One could ask how much the fascist chronopolitical project as outlined by Griffin and others differ from the overall reactionary project of wider conservatism. However, Griffin has been consistently adamant about separating fascism from conservatism on account of the former's explicitly revolutionary intent and practice—according to him, while traditional conservatives intend to uphold the old order, fascists want to tear it down to construct their own new order (Griffin, 1991). In general, Griffin's distinction makes it difficult to conceptualize the actual collaborations between conservatives and fascists that was a prominent feature of all successful fascist projects in the interwar years. However, this distinction in chronopolitical intent—speeding up vs. restraining revolutionary processes—is enlightening with regard to Schmitt.

In its apocalypticist tendencies, German National Socialism has been described as a form of "progressive millennialism" (Redles, 2012), striving toward salvation and historical fulfillment, but with an avertive millenarian tendency that identified a challenge and time of tribulation that would require struggle and precede that salvation (Wessinger, 2014, p. 434). Schmitt would agree on the need for an aversion of potentially apocalyptic forces, but his apocalypticism was wholly avertive, devoid of millenarian belief. And this is where a politico-theological perspective of the chronopolitical schemas involved becomes important.

It is easy to see the usefulness of apocalypticist language for all the chronopolitical projects touched upon here, progressivist and reactionary alike. Both radicalized progressives and reactionaries could express their projects in apocalyptic terms and thus deploy apocalypticism as a chronopolitical project. As social strife intensified, so too could rhetoric find more and more recourse to apocalyptic themes in different directions, whether millenarian or avertive. Apocalypticism became a way of conceptualizing ends and transitions, a particular political vocabulary in which forms, conventions, and turns of phrase laden with eschatological meaning become highly visible and applicable. This is true even of liberal or moderately conservative thinkers like Cohn, Löwith, and Voegelin, for whom apocalypticism carried with it the sense of apocalyptic danger to Western civilization.

Though there is general agreement that, for instance, liberal and fascist chronopolitics are strongly if not inherently opposed, it could be claimed that they nevertheless can be subsumed under a modern regime of historicity in Hartog's terms as different projects oriented toward bringing about a fulfillment of time. That is, whatever the expressed content of the *telos* of their respective struggles, they uphold a teleological view of history moving toward a decisive point or end goal, an analysis in line with a view of fascism as an inherently modernist set of projects (Griffin, 2007). In apocalypticist terms, this would mean fulfillment, regardless of whether that fulfillment is envisaged as evolutionary, revolutionary, or restorative. Therefore, the paradigm of politico-religious analysis of modern progressivism and totalitarianism, expressed by the likes of Cohn, Löwith, Voegelin, and, as I will argue, also by Schmitt, refuted by Blumenberg, but still very much influencing discussions on these matters, tends to treat modern philosophy of history in general as apocalypticist or even millenarian, as existing within the same frame of orientation toward futuristic fulfillment.

Turning to Schmitt, his politico-theological chronopolitics of concrete order thinking were not only counterrevolutionary but also explicitly broke with the restorative project and opted for an active reactionary stance, as is made explicit in the fourth chapter of *Political Theology* (Schmitt, 2005). This is the essence of his katechontism, though that idea cannot be reconstructed through a reading of *Political Theology* alone, and the rest of this paper is dedicated to explicating this chronopolitical project. Schmitt's alignment with and bringing together of ideas from Karl Löwith and Hans Freyer within the frame of his politico-theological critique of modernity shows him to be a thinker of this paradigm, and his katechontism, even when charged with the devout symbolist imaginary of Konrad Weiss, belongs to a long tradition of counter-revolutionary realists, aware—and (sometimes rightly) terrified!—of the revolutionary power of an unchecked apocalypticist spirit.

As I noted at the beginning of this section, Schmitt has more often been read as an exponent of apocalypticism than as an exponent of the paradigm oriented toward its analysis. In fact, he could be regarded as an exponent of both, though not really in the way that he is often read in light of this paradigm. To explain this, we need to turn to the problem of dominant modes of interpretation of Schmitt's political theology.

Schmitt's political theology: Decisionistic or avertive apocalypticism?

As the subtitle of *Political Theology* suggests, the work's concern is primarily with the concept of sovereignty, which Schmitt famously defines as being the property of him who decides over the state of the exception (Schmitt, 2005, p. 5). The meaning of the title, *Political Theology*, is explained in the book's third chapter that opens with the assertion that "[a]ll significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts" (Schmitt, 2005, p. 36). The state of the exception is the limit case of legal order, since it constitutes the suspension of the law, leaving only the order that is required for the state to survive. In the same way, the miracle is the limit case of creation, since it is here that the divine power shows its ultimate superiority over all that is created. The concept of sovereignty employed by modern state theory is thus a secularized version of the doctrine concerning the divine miracle (Schmitt, 2005, p. 36).

However, as is now generally recognized, Schmitt's engagement with political theology goes way beyond the observation of an analogy within the frame of state theory, as well as beyond his avowed if eccentric Catholic faith (see Wacker, 1994). Much has been made of Schmitt's apocalyptic tendencies, particularly when his political theology is read through the final chapter of *Political Theology*, with its call for a "bloody decisive battle" in the struggle between anarchistic atheism and the forces of faith and order (Schmitt, 2005, p. 56). This view of history has been linked to Schmitt's decisionism, authoritarianism, antisemitism, as well as an alleged ultimately nihilistic Gnosticism.

The genealogy of this reading of Schmitt can be traced back to Karl Löwith's pseudonymous critique under the rubric of "occasionalist decisionism" in 1935, a critique that was further developed by Christian von Krockow after World War II (von Krockow, 1958; Löwith, 1995). The designation of occasional decisionism comes from a combination of Schmitt's refutation of what he perceived as the subjectivist occasionalism inherent in political romanticism (Schmitt, 2011). Löwith saw a very similar tendency inherent in what he described as Schmitt's decisionism, the focus on the non-normative groundlessness of the pure decision described by Schmitt in *Political Theology* in contrast to the reliance on abstract normativity, which he described as normativism (Schmitt, 2005).

This influential interpretation came to form the basis for the theological interpretation of Schmitt that was initiated and developed in the 1980s by Heinrich Meier, who placed a decisionistic faith in revelation at the heart of Schmitt's thought (Meier, 1995, 1998). That Meier applied a conception of political theology taken from the work of Leo Strauss, and thus alien to Schmitt's conception of things, has not been sufficiently acknowledged. Following Meier's work, Schmitt's katechontic theology has been described as "fundamentalist" by Günther Meuter (Meuter, 1994). Ruth Groh has taken Meier's reading of Schmitt further by arguing that not only was Schmitt motivated by theological concerns, but that the faith that drove him was a heretical one, since Schmitt was ultimately a Gnostic (Groh, 1998, 2014).

Gnosticism should here be seen as a sharply dualistic, even Manichean, monotheistic faith. However, Groh's conception of Schmitt as a Gnostic must be understood in relation to

a paradigm that, in a fashion very similar to and in close contact with the paradigm of apocalypticism, emerged in the early twentieth century, was consolidated in the interwar years, and was fully formulated and debated in the postwar era (Lazier, 2008; Styfhals, 2019). In fact, it was strong enough to be regarded as an aspect of the secularization idea that Blumenberg confronted in his *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Blumenberg, 1983).

According to Groh (and along the lines of the paradigm of Gnosticism analysis in modern German thought), Gnosticism sharply differentiates between the Creator-God and the God of Salvation. The creation of the material world represents a fall, and humankind remains trapped within a fallen reality, from which the only escape is the knowledge of the sharp distinction between creator and savior. In its twentieth-century explanation, this sharp dualism came to interpreted as the root of modern Manichaeism and a long line of social strife. To Groh, Gnosticism explains Schmitt's focus on the friend/enemy distinction but also his antisemitism (since Judaism was often the target of Gnostic interpretations of Christianity) and his antimodern attempt to ground thought in faith in response to the process of innerworldly rationalization (Groh, 2014). It all comes together neatly in an inherent Gnostic essence.

Groh's interpretation is radical, but in its radicality it provides a particularly clear image of an argument inherent to a wider interpretation of how Schmitt's theology corresponds to his political theory, even accepted by an authority like Reinhard Mehring who describes Schmitt's metaphysical framework as that of an "apocalyptic Gnostic" (Mehring, 2021, p. 206). The same analysis is found in recent readings of Schmitt in relation to Löwith (Kroll, 2010; Griffioen, 2022). The image of historicity that emerges out of the dominant approaches to Schmitt as a Gnostic appears quite similar to that which, following Griffin's work, dominates the interpretation of fascist temporalities today. The politico-theological essence of that which is understood as Schmitt's decisionism corresponds to fascism's structure of apocalypticism. Just as von Krockow once claimed that Schmitt's decision for decisiveness led him into cooperation with Hitler (von Krockow, 1958), to Meier and Groh it is Schmitt's faith in the revelatory itself that binds him to the Messianic structure of the fascist cult of the leader.

It is here that the interpretation of Schmitt's chronopolitics as oriented toward salvation becomes suspect, which also illustrates the usefulness of viewing his political theology through a chronopolitical lens. Schmitt did come to support an ultimately fascist project, but was his motivation for doing so contingent upon an apocalyptic belief in decisiveness or even the possibilities for salvation opened by a sacralization of the Führer? My venture here is that it was not. In fact, I would argue that Schmitt's support for Hitler paradoxically was dependent upon a chronopolitics wholly opposed to that of fascism, one that the image of him as a decisionist Gnostic only works to obscure.

While Schmitt was both authoritarian and an anti-Semite, he was neither a nihilist nor a Gnostic—and neither was he a decisionist, contrary to what a reading focused on some formulations in *Political Theology* may suggest. Rather, Schmitt's concern was not with a "bare decision" as such, but rather with the conditions under which order and decision could be brought together, along the lines suggested in works like *On the Three Types of Juristic Thought* (Schmitt, 2004). The politico-theological frame for such thinking is found in early essays like "The Visibility of the Church" (1917) and *Roman Catholicism and Political Form* (1923), but it is also reflected in his later work on the concept of *nomos* and in the essay that is of primary concern to this paper, "Three Possibilities of a Christian Conception of History," or "Drei Möglichkeiten eines christlichen Geschichtsbildes," written and published around the same time (in the late 1940s and around 1950) as *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum* (1950), Schmitt's major postwar work. Schmitt's concrete order thinking, or institutionalism as some call it, can be described as an "exaltation of legal science as a jurisgenerative practice that shelters a community's institutional practices and… traditional identity" (Croce and Salvatore, 2021, p. 1169). This idea of an order-oriented jurisprudence is clearly at odds with the understanding of decisionism emanating out of Löwith, von Krockow, and others.

Against the line of understanding of Schmitt's political theology and the *katechon* informed by Meier, I will, as I have stated above, present a reading of it oriented toward his idea of concrete order thinking. This aligns my paper with a series of other commentaries on Schmitt which of late have come to emphasize the importance of concrete order thinking for Schmitt's work throughout his career and life (Brännström, 2016; Croce and Salvatore, 2021). A related route of analysis is pursued by Luke Collison, who traces the structural likeness between Schmitt's conception of the *katechon* and his earlier theory of the commissarial dictator (Collison, 2021).

Another important addition to the literature on Schmitt and theology that relativizes his recourse to theology in a constructive way is Hugo E. Herrera's analysis of Schmitt's positioning of himself "between technological rationality and theology" (Herrera, 2020). However, Herrera is too concerned with distancing Schmitt's concept of "juridical reason" from theology to acknowledge the extent to which Schmitt's secularized theory of law is dependent on a structure that remains deeply theological, though not in the way that Meier and Groh envisage.

For Schmitt, the theological and the political cannot be conceived of as separate entities, but as intertwined or even codetermined. There is no primacy here, but merely a difference in perspective: the political is visible in the relational quality of concepts and thought, as Schmitt states in *The Concept of the Political* (Schmitt, 2007a, p. 26–27, 30), and the theological in the fact that concepts and institutions ultimately express and

rely on a metaphysical worldview, which is the theme of *Political Theology*—or as Schmitt succinctly puts it: "[t]he metaphysical image that a definite epoch forges of the world has the same structure as what the world immediately understands to be appropriate as a form of its political organization" (Schmitt, 2005, p. 46). Thus, Schmitt's thought cannot be conceived of as being expressed or oscillating "between" them, since there is no contradiction between politics and theology in Schmitt's work except when conceived of as historically formed fields. As such, both are graspable within the frame of an avertive-apocalypticist chronopolitics, a politico-theological theory of reaction, which is in fact the form in which Schmitt expresses the discourse of juridical reason that Herrera outlines.

The themes of Schmitt's essay on the Christian conception of history, and the intertextual set of references he uses to formulate his position on modern philosophy of history and its inheritance of Christian eschatology, shows another side of Schmitt's politico-theological thinking than that which dominates its reception. Schmitt may very well be an "apocalyptician of the counterrevolution" (Taubes, 1987), but this particular form of apocalypticism needs to be understood on its own terms, as political theology related to an institutional order and accessible in secularized analogous terms. The essay is important since it shows Schmitt working with Freyer's conception of the *katechon* and connecting it to Löwith's reading of the modern philosophy of history as deeply indebted to Judeo-Christian Messianism. Discussing the possibility of a bridge between Christian eschatological expectation and historical action, it also establishes a bridge between political theology and political theory, and between Schmitt's early and late work.

In what follows, I will discuss these topics and develop my reading of Schmitt's apocalypticist imagery through his particular use of three mythological figures of theological import—Epimetheus, the Virgin Mary, and the *katechon*. My contention is that the basic structure of Schmitt's political theology, and its place in modern thought as perceived by its creator, can be discerned through an analysis of the way he employs these three figures. This does not mean that they are particularly common in Schmitt's work. It does, however, mean that the way he uses them is particularly telling. His way of employing these figures gives us an insight into the eschatological character of his thought, which paradoxically turns out to illustrate the modern preconditions or contexts for his politico-theological venture as a form of avertive apocalypticism.

Reading Schmitt's only true attempt at a systematic text on the modern theory of political myth, "Die politische Theorie des Mythus" from 1923, also published as the last chapter in *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* with the much less suggestive title "Irrationalist Theories of the Direct Use of Force," it becomes apparent that a primary concern for him was to decelerate the growing political fragmentation following the development of modern social mythologies, for him best represented by the work of the revolutionary Georges Sorel (Schmitt, 2000, p. 65–77). Schmitt's apocalypticist beliefs do not mean that he longed for or struggled to bring about the end-times, Armageddon, and Final Judgment. On the contrary: Schmitt wanted to keep the *eschaton* at bay. Even if the *parousia*, that is, the Second Coming of Christ, and God's reckoning were inevitable, he sought the possibility of a delay, of a restraining force that would impede the approach of chaos and final conflict, a force keeping apocalyptic energies in political check.

This is the basic substance of Schmitt's political theology, and it fits the pattern of a continued relevance of religion for modern politics and thought observed by a number of other German thinkers of Schmitt's generation. Schmitt's political theology could be said to actively mirror, in a very conscious way, elements of modern thought that he perceived as destructive and wanted to restrain. The majority of Schmitt's works are not ostensibly about political theology. They generally deal with worldly juridical matters such as constitutional affairs, the principles of legality, and the like. Granted, Schmitt's perspective is not solely oriented toward the day to day of public life. Rather, his concern was the extraordinary, the crisis, and extreme conditions, like war, coups d'état, revolution, and the ultimate sources of power. That is how political theology as a discipline or discourse comes into the picture: all these elements of crisis fit within a frame of eschatological interpretation of world historical events. My suggestion is that we should read Schmitt's politico-theological interventions as articulating a position within a specifically modern regime of historicity, something that makes his interventions not directly antimodern, but rather alter-modern, as a theory of or for political reaction.

Karl Löwith, Hans Freyer, and the modern regime of history

Following Hartog one can say that legitimation under the modern regime of historicity was to be sought in regard to and with orientation toward the future. Actions in the present were to be understood in relation to the future they were going to bring about (whereas traditional, past-oriented regimes attempted to model themselves on the great examples of experience and tradition). Historical development, and to act in accordance with it, was to become the answer to contemporary suffering, a pattern that applies to paradigms of evolutionary development as well as revolutionary politics (Hartog, 2015).

As Schmitt put it in the essay "Three Possibilities of a Christian Conception of History":

> Today, every attempt at a self-understanding ultimately proves to be a situating oneself by means of the philosophy of history or a utopian self-dislocation. Today, all human

> beings who plan and attempt to unite the masses behind their plans engage in some form of philosophy of history. (Schmitt, 2007b, p. 161; Schmitt, 2009a, p. 167)

This reflection on the importance of the philosophy of history introduced an essay primarily dealing with a book published the year before—Karl Löwith's *Meaning in History*. The book would have a formative influence on the debate regarding the implications of secularization in Germany during the coming decades. It has been claimed that it both defined and finished off the philosophy of history after 1945 (Mehring, 1996, p. 231).

In his pseudonymous scathing critique of Schmitt in the 1930s, Löwith had described the jurist's theories as an intellectual expression of the same European sickness that had produced the totalitarian horrors of the twentieth century, a fact most likely unknown to Schmitt in 1950 (the essay would be reprinted under Löwith's own name in an anthology in 1960, something that may explain Schmitt's later expressions of disdain for Löwith). Nevertheless, Schmitt was in fact in many ways closer to Löwith than the latter would probably have been willing to acknowledge, as Schmitt's very positive evaluation of *Meaning in History* indicates. However, Schmitt wanted to counter one specific point: in his view, Löwith had misinterpreted the possibility of a merging of Christian eschatology with historical consciousness. Schmitt's response to Löwith in 1950 was thus not overtly critical. Instead, Schmitt obviously saw his own conception of secularization mirrored in Löwith's, though he saw fit to introduce an active Christian element to counter certain of its tendencies.

To flesh out his Christian alternative to Löwith, Schmitt brings in ideas and concepts from the conservative sociologist Hans Freyer and the symbolist poet Konrad Weiss. In Löwith, Schmitt finds a secularization narrative that describes how the substance of Christian eschatology was reshaped into a progressivist philosophy of history. In Freyer, Schmitt finds a conceptual tool to introduce a Christian stance against this profanation of eschatology. In Weiss, finally, Schmitt finds a symbolist aesthetic that provides the greater framing for a Christian conception of history, in Schmitt's and Weiss's terms a "Marian image of history."

To Löwith, the human need to interpret history at all as some sort of meaningful story grew out of the experience of suffering. As he puts it

> The interpretation of history is, in the last analysis, an attempt to understand the meaning of history as the meaning of suffering by historical action… In the Western world the problem of suffering has been faced in two different ways: by the myth of Prometheus and the faith in Christ—the one a rebel, the other a servant. (Löwith, 1949, p. 3)

When Löwith chooses to compare Prometheus and Christ, and with them myth and faith, he simultaneously brings forth the central theme of his book, that is, how ancient, Christian, and after them modern conceptions of history are structurally constituted and related to a theodicy of suffering.

Basically, what we can see expressed here are two different convictions: either suffering can be explained through the powers of myth within a cyclical universe of eternal recurrence, the laws of which are based on immanent principles, as a punishment for transgressions against the orderly functioning of things (the ancient understanding); or suffering is explained as a feature of this world, for now, a product of the sin in this world, to be redeemed in the world to come, through Christ's second coming and the final judgment. The historical thought prominent in modernity has inherited the orientation toward the future from Christianity, but it is concerned with immanent causes of history's movement, not its transcendent guarantor.

Modern philosophy of history is thus a compound of ancient and Christian elements, according to Löwith, which is the reason for its "dim vision" in comparison with either of its two sources (Löwith, 1949, p. 207). Whether or not modernity's vision is actually "dimmed" by the compound of faith in transcendence and immanent reason, it is striking how well the idea of a compound between myth and eschatology effectively describes the basic structure of Schmitt's politico-theological figuration.

Another important text for Schmitt's essay on the possibilities of a Christian conception of history is the monumental *Weltgeschichte Europas*, "Europe's World History," by Hans Freyer, published in 1948. *Weltgeschichte Europas* is a two-volume, thousand-page work reflecting on the history of civilization in a grand Hegelian fashion, though it does not feature elements of progressive teleology. Freyer's attitude is more skeptical, particularly in relation to the revolutionary tendencies of modern thought.

What Schmitt particularly picks up from Freyer is the figure of the *katechon*, a mystical concept introduced to Christian thought in the Second Letter to the Thessalonians. The *katechon* is a figure or force [Paul—though it is contested whether Paul actually wrote the letter (Grossheutschi, 1996, p. 11)—mentions both aspects] that restrains lawlessness and "the lawless one," the latter often interpreted as the Antichrist. Thus, the *katechon* is an eschatological figure, but not Messianic. Exactly this distinction was important to Schmitt: the *katechon* is this-worldly, not transcendent, but it is in service of the transcendent. It does the Lord's work against evil and disorder, lawlessness, but even as part of salvation history, it does not work to deliver us. It only makes our salvation possible through the continued existence of institutional support. Freyer claims that both the worldly Christian empire and the Christian church served as literal *katechontic* forces in the chaotic transition from declining Roman rule to more stable conditions during the Middle Ages. They guaranteed the persistence of cultural order

during tumultuous times and they worked as restraining powers, *haltende Mächte* (Freyer, 1948).

In his later work, Freyer would move on to take up the analysis of the growing importance of technological development for understanding modern world history. Industrial, political, and social revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century had created a specific set of problems for European order. The social and technological processes permeating human life had become ever more autonomous and difficult to control. In *Theorie des gegenwärtigen Zeitalters*, "Theory of the Contemporary Age," he used the term "secondary systems" to describe the problem (Freyer, 1955). These systems were "secondary" since they did not arise from an organic order. Schmitt was quick to pick up this term, and used it in his book on Hamlet, *Hamlet or Hecuba?*, in 1956 (Schmitt, 2009b, p. 63).

The secondary systems of modern industrial capitalist and socialist societies presented many dangers to social order, according to Freyer. Humanity's increasing dependence on technology, incomprehensible to most people, and on the social state was leading to a loss of responsibility, duties, and concrete freedoms. Instead, modern society experienced increased demands for social unity, gradual loss of individuality, and growing personal alienation. The secondary systems divided man's life into various mechanical functions, while at the same time reducing him to a part of a huge mass, only functionally differentiated. The increased dependence of society and its inhabitants on secondary systems constituted a grave threat to the organic unity of natural human life.

However, Freyer put his faith in the continued resilience of a set of *haltende Mächte* that were slowing this development down and stabilizing the "secondary systems". Among these "restraining forces," he counted family, faith, traditional authority, and friendship. These forces provided the meaning, depth, and richness that the atomizing "secondary systems" lacked (Freyer, 1955). Thus, Freyer's vision appears to be rather classically conservative in its outlook, and after the war he had become a deradicalized supporter of the Federal Republic (Muller, 1987, p. 317). It undoubtedly provided more space for these forces of resistance than the socialist block. What is particular about Freyer's analysis is his use of the figure of the *katechon* as a term for the restraining powers he envisions as socially necessary, a feature that makes his social vision acquire a slightly eccentric quality in comparison with the rather typical conservatism that his position otherwise signals.

This Christian motif connects Schmitt's political theology to the institutional theory of Freyer. Schmitt and Freyer were united in their disdain for modern utopianism and centralized planning. Both refer critically to planning, *Planung*, not as ineffective, as other conservative-minded bourgeois intellectuals of the time did, but rather as too effective, as potentially destructive of established orders and the meaning they provide—though they may not have been convinced of the long-time sustainability of centralized planning. To both, the idea of planning encapsulated the utopian spirit of modern Prometheanism, and their use of the term *haltende Mächte* implicates the chronopolitical aspect of their work, as they clearly perceived their approach as contrary to that of a modern progressivism. It has, however, been noted that Freyer lacked interest in providing a thicker theological framework to the increasingly reliance on Christianity that became a strong feature of his postwar work (Muller, 1987, p. 339). The same cannot be said of Carl Schmitt.

Epimetheus: The self-stylization of an anti-Promethean

The Prometheus of Greek mythology was a titan who famously stole fire from the gods and gave it to mankind. For this and other crimes against Zeus, he was chained to a cliff and subjected to an ever-returning, eternal torture. Through his association with fire and his rebellion against the gods, he became a symbol of civilizational and technological progress, especially in modern appropriations of the myth. Karl Marx, for instance, called Prometheus "the greatest saint and martyr of the philosopher's calendar" in his doctoral dissertation on ancient atomism. Generally speaking, in modern interpretations Prometheus has been envisioned as humanity's friend in opposition to the old orders of divine hierarchy.

This view of Prometheus is probably what connects him to the myth of Pandora and her box, as the latter was opened by Prometheus's brother, Epimetheus, who had been seduced by Pandora and therefore sprung the trap of the gods. In the old Greek tradition, Epimetheus is depicted as the antithesis of Prometheus. Their names have been interpreted as related to Afterthought (Epimetheus) and Forethought (Prometheus). The "afterthought" of Epimetheus is not seldom taken to imply lacking intelligence. As Schmitt says of his intellectual peers in his postwar diaries: "[t]hey are all on the side of Prometheus" (Schmitt, 2015, p. 180). "Bachofen," Schmitt writes, "made of Epimetheus a dullard hylic" in opposition to the "manly-fiery-solar Prometheus" (Schmitt, 2015, p. 180). But how could they then be brothers? In reality, Schmitt suggests, they were brothers "like Cain and Abel" (Schmitt, 2015, p. 180).

"Epimetheanism" appears as a line of thought only in Schmitt's later work. Schmitt seems to have gotten the figure of Epimetheus from his friend the poet Konrad Weiss who used it in a book published in 1933 entitled *Der christliche Epimetheus*. Weiss took the place of a central poetic reference for Schmitt once held by the expressionist Theodor Däubler, about whose work *Nordlicht* Schmitt had written a study in 1916 (Schmitt, 1991). In 1946, Schmitt wrote that Weiss had come to replace Däubler partially because Schmitt had become aware of the latter's "nourishment" from "Promethean-Atlantic gulf streams" (Schmitt, 2002b, p. 51). Relating Prometheus to the Atlantic Ocean this way emphasizes how Schmitt envisages

the connection between Prometheanism and his conception of modernity as emerging from the English seventeenth-century turn to the sea and away from continental Europe following the Reformation and the English revolution, a process described in his book on Hobbes's *Leviathan* (Schmitt, 2008a).

The Christian Epimetheus of Weiss therefore appears as a specifically countermodern figuration when appropriated by Schmitt. When Schmitt calls himself "a genuine if unworthy case of the Christian Epimetheus" after the war, this could be taken as describing his engagement with National Socialism (Schmitt, 2002a). That is, the collaboration with the Hitler regime would be likened to opening Pandora's box, confessed Epimetheanism as a backwards admission of guilt. But there is something more to Epimetheus here. As a mythological figure, Epimetheus is not just a simpleton. He can be described as expressing genuine faith. In contrast to his brother, Epimetheus does not challenge the gods. Instead, he accepts their gifts willingly and dutifully, whatever may come of it.

Therefore, Epimetheanism entails an element of proscribed necessity. When Prometheus proclaims his dissidence with the godly order and attempts to challenge the fate of humanity, Epimetheus accepts his fate and acts accordingly. The Epimethean likewise can be considered a dissident to Prometheanism. In the words of Konrad Weiss, quoted by Schmitt in the late 1940s, the Christian Epimetheus can encourage us thus: "Fulfill that which you must, it is already/always fulfilled and you only answer"—"*Vollbringe, was du musst, es ist schon immer vollbracht und du tust nur Antwort*" (quoted in Schmitt, 2002b, p. 53). Epimetheanism is a mythological form for a historico-political fatalism. It is like Schmitt's own version of "only obeying orders," but it also has an added quality of describing a dissident position in relation to the mythologies of modern philosophies of history.

The Promethean structure of modern Messianism and the Christian Epimetheus

The direct occasion for Schmitt's essay on the Christian conception of history was, as said, his reading of Karl Löwith's great work on the secularization of Western historical consciousness, *Meaning in History*. Reading it against Löwith's book discloses important elements of Schmitt's general view of history: the continued importance of eschatology in modernity, the inherent implications of mythical figures, and how Schmitt's political theology is supposed to work as an intellectual project (or perhaps rather: the framework of apocalypticism in which Schmitt's political theology is employed as an intellectual project).

To summarize Löwith's narrative, one could say that Judeo-Christian eschatology finds its traditional form in Augustine's theology, where worldly history is regarded as empty of meaning and all hope for salvation is placed outside of creation, in the hands of the almighty Creator-God. This theology is then challenged during the high Middle Ages by the theology of Joachim di Fiore, who reads worldly history prophetically, interpreting its meaning through Biblical exegesis. This way, Löwith argues, it becomes possible for Joachim and his millenarian followers to invest worldly history with a supernatural meaning and thereby to provide immanent events with transcendent implications. Not only can we see God working through worldly history, argues Joachim. We can also expect salvation within worldly history, as a peaceful kingdom prefiguring the return of Christ at the end of days.

Christian eschatology thus evolves from a condemnation of worldly, human history into an affirmation of its inherent teleology as a path toward perfection. This structure, Löwith claims, is the foundation for Hegel's conception of history as the self-realization of Spirit, even if Hegel collapses the transcendent God into the immanence of history. To Hegel, history is one and immanent to the evolution of *logos*. God's providence is turned into the cunning of reason. And it is this conception of *logos*, Löwith argues, that makes it possible for Marx to develop his view of the economic base of history and the class struggle. In Marx and other moderns, we find an affirmation of worldly activity as inherently Messianic, even though they themselves cannot see their own Messianism as such.

What Löwith presents, though he does not use the term himself, is something of a Promethean turn of an apocalypticist conception of time, through an immanentization of Messianism. That is, the shift from Christianity's patient expectation of God's transcendent grace to a focus on immanent work by humankind itself signals something unmistakably Promethean. It is a radical revolutionary idea, opposed to the conception of an eschatology dependent on a transcendent grace. In this, it was sharply distinguished from traditional Christian faith and the inherited theological structure of Augustine's eschatology. What emerges here, then, is a theologically structured figuration of political myth, expressing a conception of modernization as human self-assertion, to use Hans Blumenberg's term (Blumenberg, 1983). This, I argue, is also what Schmitt wants to criticize with his "Christian Epimetheus". Of course, an almost necessary corollary to a Christian Epimetheus would be something akin to a "Christian Prometheus," which according to its own inherent dynamic is easily reconfigured into a Prometheanism that is immanent, secular, and atheist. A closer look at Schmitt's essay on the possibilities of a Christian view of history can explain how.

In the essay "Three Possibilities", Schmitt seems to agree with the basic narrative that Löwith presents in *Meaning in History*. Indeed, it has clear similarities with the narrative from *Political Theology* and other works where Schmitt touches upon an outline of a theory of secularization. The "Christian" Prometheanism of progressivism that can be reconstructed out of Löwith's studies on the modern reconfiguration of

eschatological faith is strikingly similar to what Schmitt calls "the anti-religion of technicity," "the religion of technical progress," "a religion of technical miracles," and "a vulgar mass religion predicated on the apparent neutrality of technology" in his essay "The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations" (Schmitt, 2007c, p. 81, 85, 93).

To Schmitt, Löwith's description of the Messianism inherent to progressivist philosophies of history gives credence to his own statements regarding political theology. However, Schmitt takes issue with Löwith's claim that "a Christian history is non-sense" (Löwith, 1949, p. 197). Augustine's distinction between worldly history and grace, *Weltgeschichte* and *Heilsgeschehen* in the terms of the German translation of Löwith's book, is paradigmatic in this regard for Löwith. Schmitt, *contra* Löwith, wants to argue for a Christian conception of history—and he does so precisely through that merging of eschatology with worldly history that Löwith would like to question. Schmitt does this through the appeal to Freyer's idea of katechontic, restraining forces. At the same time, Schmitt remains opposed to the Promethean turn of modern historical consciousness. Here, the figure of Epimetheus is of utmost importance.

Schmitt underlines three remarks *à propos* Löwith's work. First, he aligns Löwith with something he claims is a paradoxically strong strand in modern thought—a general tendency to compare one's own time with "the time of the Roman civil wars as well as early Christianity". Schmitt calls this "the great historical parallel" (and specifically mentions Saint Simon but insists that he is not alone; Schmitt, 2007b, p. 163; Schmitt, 2009a, p. 168). The underlying assumption here is that Löwith illustrates that the problem with the modern conception of history is a product of Christian eschatology, and hence modernity is "contemporaneous" with Christ in a formal sense. This is likely a part of the point however: Schmitt sees an importance in a form of institutional mediation that modernity has forgotten in its longing for *parousia* and the *eschaton*.

Second, Schmitt questions the separation of historical consciousness from eschatological faith made by Löwith, among others. To Schmitt, there is a clear possibility of "a bridge" offering a specifically Christian eschatological conception of history (Schmitt, 2007b, p. 164; Schmitt, 2009a, p. 169). One could describe this as a way of conceptualizing history as meaningful, while accepting Augustine's view of a sinful humankind and world history. Schmitt's "bridge" between history and eschatology, "consciousness" and "faith" as he puts it, can be found in the figure of the *katechon*, "the Restrainer" (Schmitt, 2007b, p. 164; Schmitt, 2009a, p. 169).

Third, Schmitt argues that the essence of Christianity is not found in some sort of "morality" or in a "doctrine." Neither can it be conceived of as a religion "in the sense of comparative religious studies." Rather, Schmitt writes, Christianity must be conceived as a faithful observation of, in his words, a singular historical event: "the incarnation in the Virgin Mary". What is essentially Christian, according to Schmitt, is therefore "the Marian image of history," which is Epimethean in the sense envisaged by his friend Konrad Weiss (Schmitt, 2007b, p. 165; Schmitt, 2009a, p. 170). As Schmitt puts it in his *Glossarium*:

> Our enemy always repeatedly fails in the face of these three secrets: the incarnation of the son, the virgin birth, the resurrection of the flesh. Of these three secrets only the second contains the approach to history, through the Virgin's consent to the will of the Lord. (Schmitt, 2015, p. 204)

Marian katechontism: The creaturization of countermyth

It should be emphasized that the Annunciation of the Lord must be regarded as a quite particular way of understanding the singularity of the Christ-event. That Weiss and Schmitt emphasize the Virgin Mary and a particular Marian conception of history—in contrast to, for instance, a Christological one—is significant, since it radically shifts the perspective on the incarnation. Rather than focusing on how God becomes "the Son of Man," basically one of us, the Marian perspective tells the story of how God's demands fall upon us all in a seemingly contingent manner, uncaring for our individual welfare or wishes. What is at stake here is our confrontation with God the Father as our Lord, not with the Son as our redeeming Other. Marianism also contains a clear way of responding to God's commands—through obedience. Marianism has its own eschatology and view of grace, clearly expressed by Weiss through a reference to Mary's words in response to the Annunciation in Luke 1:38—"Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word" (Weiss, 1933, p. 105).

This is to some extent an occasionalism, but not the nihilist or Gnostic kind that is so often read into Schmitt's work. Rather than challenging established order through an adherence to a more "authentic" and decisive relation to "nothingness" and groundlessness, Marianism is an expression of a will to counter what is perceived as modern nihilism through an adherence to the will of the Creator, whether it is mediated through creation (immanent laws) or expressed in unmediated decisions (extraordinary measures, miracles). The Creator may work through nature or through his sovereign grace—fully exhibited through the figure of Mary and her miraculous pregnancy.

Schmitt writes that history bears witness to strong "creatures"—or rather "creaturizations", since he uses the slightly obscure *Kreaturierungen*, a term he had picked up from Weiss—of insertions of the eternal in the course of temporal epochs (Schmitt, 2007b, p. 166; Schmitt, 2009a, p. 170). From the Marian perspective, immanent creation runs its own course, but its very nature of createdness, the very fact that it is creaturely, opens it up for the miraculous transgression of moments when the will of God transcends creation's immanent laws. Mary is

perhaps the mediating figure *par excellence* in the Christian tradition, the creature that is necessary for the creator himself to become creaturely incarnated. Mary is an essential part of salvation history, but she is also, however holy, outside of the trinity. Her election through grace and the pneumatic generation of her pregnancy represents an alternative view of charismatic structure, that is, the distribution of God's gifts to his chosen.

Thinking along Schmitt's theory as expressed in *Political Theology* and *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, we can take Mariology as the metaphysical expression of an institutional ideal. Marian theology shows how Schmitt's understanding of the miraculous exception and decisionism from *Political Theology* can be related to the concrete order thinking that is expressed in not only *On the Three Types of Juristic Thought* (1934), but in "The Visibility of the Church" (1917), *Roman Catholicism and Political Form* (1923), and *The Value of the State and the Significance of the Individual* (1914) as well.

In short, Schmitt's Marianism theologically explains and grounds his attempt to integrate the events of sovereignty's extraordinary, miraculous moments of exception within what could be described as a charismatically ordered political structure, preferably a state. This allows for Schmitt's theory of the institution to be read in the light of a Marian ecclesiology. What this means is that the event of the juridically extraordinary, *das Rechtswunder* to put it in the terms of Schmitt's nemesis Hans Kelsen (Kelsen, 1923, p. 271), is to be integrated into a strong totality of the political unit's juridically defined order. Thus, Marianism names a certain way of acknowledging godly transcendence within the immanence of creation, but also of obedience to the will of God. Marianism is a precondition for Schmitt's "Christian Epimetheanism" since it supplies the distinctively Christian framework with its conceptualization of the miracle. In short, this is the politico-mythological, theological frame for Schmitt's own "order thinking."

From this explication of Marianism, it is easy to see how Schmitt's conception of the *katechon* expresses something similar. This obscure Biblical figure is only mentioned in two verses in the Second Letter to the Thessalonians:

> And now you know what is restraining, that he may be revealed in his own time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way—And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the lord will consume with the breath of his mouth and destroy with the brightness of his coming. (2 Thess. 2:6–7)

Some church fathers used the *katechon* in their apologetics and claimed that it was a symbol for the Roman emperor or empire. Later, this idea was used to describe the role of the Holy Roman Empire (Grossheutschi, 1996; de Wilde, 2013). "The lawless one" is often identified as the Antichrist, whose reign over the world was predicted as part of the end-times. Restraining him therefore paradoxically meant restraining the coming of the Lord and the Judgment Day. Thus, the empire conceived of as *katechon* was not eternal, but "always had its own end and the end of the present eon in view" (Schmitt, 2006, p. 59), a very important distinction in comparison with the dominant apocalypticist chronopolitics of Schmitt's day and their millenarian promises of 1000-year kingdoms and new eras for a new earth and a new humanity.

In Schmitt's work, the *katechon* is the principle guaranteeing order, stability, and the restraining of lawlessness. It is an outspokenly antirevolutionary figure, and Schmitt is often described as something like "the most important representative of the state-affirming katechon interpretations in the twentieth century" (de Wilde, 2013, p. 116). As Schmitt himself notes, in the diaries from the time around the writing of "Three Possibilities," the *katechon* must be a real presence in the world at all times, or else the end-times would already have been upon us. In fact, here Schmitt gives us a rare admission of faith: he writes that he himself actually believes in the *katechon* (Schmitt, 2015, p. 47). This is particularly noteworthy since Schmitt here explicitly uses the word *Glaube* to describe his own position, a rare occurrence in his writings. Whether or not Schmitt truly believed in the *katechon*'s existence as "real," whatever that is taken to mean, the institutional structure implied by this metaphysical idea is something very real for Schmitt.

"Truth" may also be something relative here and asking for it leads us on the wrong track. Schmitt, inspired by (though not uncritical of) Georges Sorel, wrote that myths most of all were a product of great social energies generated by and forming human collectives, an idea he reiterated after World War II (Schmitt, 2000, p. 74–76; Schmitt, 2009c, p. 10–12). An important part of Schmitt's politico-theological project was as an attempt to counter what he viewed as the profanation of law and politics through the spirit of technicity (Schmitt, 2007c). In Schmitt's view, modernity does not transcend myth through its adherence to technological reason. Rather, technicity, in all its Prometheanism, is itself a mythicization of technology into a sort of *Weltanschauung* which naturalizes certain forms of progressivistic chronopolitics.

Political mythologies are thus rampant in modernity, Schmitt argues, and what is missing, rather than myth itself, is the framework interpreting and disciplining them. This is why Schmitt points to a conflict between political theology and myth (Schmitt, 2000, p. 76). To Schmitt, there are modern myths of different kinds, from the self-conscious myths of Sorelian activists on the left and the right to the outspokenly antimythic mythology of modern technicity that permeates modern progressivisms of all kinds. Just as there is no view from nowhere, there is no non-mythical political position beyond the apocalypticism of modernity. That is why Schmitt, in contrast to Löwith's hope for the spread of a non-engaged and Stoic view

of history, argues for a specifically Christian engagement with modern historical thinking, an engagement *via* deferral, delay, and restraint.

Epimetheus, the Virgin Mary, and the *katechon* are therefore counter-mythical figures of central importance to Schmitt's intellectual project, constructs by a Catholic layman theologian attempting to critically grasp his time in thought. They are expressions of an eccentric theology, but as countermyths they may tell us something about their time and their creator. However, they also show us that Schmitt's apocalypticism was distinctively Christian—even if it was explicitly not Messianic (it was, as I have argued above, Marianist and katechontic)—and that he strived to delimit anarchic elements of Christianity in their consequences for the political sphere, nothing else, in line with his observation regarding what he saw as the great accomplishment of Thomas Hobbes: the rendering harmless of certain anarchic tendencies in Christ's teaching within the fields of politics and the social (Schmitt, 2015, p. 184). What this effectively meant was the relegating of questions concerning salvation outside the field of politics and beyond social contestation.

In effect, Schmitt was closer to the church authorities that Norman Cohn's "mystical anarchists" fought than he was to the millenarian heretics, even with his quite conscious engagement with politico-theological themes and modern apocalypticism. He was thus quite far from Voegelin's modern Gnostics, and he opposed Löwith's discounting of the potential for historical action in Christian eschatology, even though he shared the overall analysis of Messianism's influence on the modern philosophy of history. In fact, Schmitt belonged to the same paradigm as these thinkers, though his (chrono-)political approach differs from theirs. While they, in the name of order and security, abhorred and condemned the strains of apocalypticist chronopolitics they perceived as so prevalent under the modern regime of historicity, Schmitt saw in these strains the only hope for security and order, if approached reasonably and brought within the frame of restraining political institutions imbued with mediating myth. In this, the basic katechontic premise of Schmitt's political theology of concrete order thinking becomes clearly visible, particularly when viewed through a chronopolitical lens.

Conclusion

Of course, it would be easy to claim that Schmitt's Marian katechontism was a late and maybe even temporary invention, entirely the product of postwar anxieties, potentially even short-lived remorse, and not representative of Schmitt's theological convictions over time. Did he not present a Gnostic reading of the Trinity in *Political Theology II*? And was he not influenced by Theodor Däubler's ultimately Gnostic overtones in his twenties? Against these interventions, important aspects of Meier's and Groh's analysis of Schmitt, I would argue that Marianism and katechontism as politico-theological structures better match the concrete order thinking that is prevalent throughout Schmitt's work. Then, I would ask skeptics to take a second look at the postscript of *Political Theology II* and at Schmitt's essay on Däubler's *Nordlicht* for a reconsideration of Schmitt's thought as expressed there.

In *Political Theology II*, Schmitt describes an inherent potential conflict within the Trinity itself and relates it to "the main structural problem with Gnostic dualism," which in turn relates to the question of enmity. Many readers appear to miss that Schmitt's point here is to develop the criticism of "political Christology" that he introduced in his guidelines to the reader at the beginning of the book (Schmitt, 2008b, p. 33). Perhaps it is worth remembering that what primarily concerns Schmitt about enmity is the modern liberal idea of the possibility of an end to enmity. As he makes perfectly clear in *The Concept of the Political*, that illusion ultimately serves to make the political opponent into something non-human (Schmitt, 2007a, p. 54). In *Theory of the Partisan*, Schmitt develops this analysis with an eye toward the "absolute enemy" of Leninist and Maoist theory (Schmitt, 2007d).

Thus, what Schmitt in *Political Theology II* describes as a continued problem with Gnostic dualism is the still-living hope of salvation immanent to the sharp distinction between creator and savior inherent in that dualism, a structure he compares to that of modern ideas of emancipation. Schmitt's Marian conception of history does not share that view of salvation, and his katechontism is directly oriented to suppressing its political implications.

With regards to Däubler, it is simply not true that Schmitt embraces dualism. First of all, Schmitt notes that even though those who "perceive the moral importance of the time" and also know themselves to be "the children of the time" must become dualists, like the Gnostic Marcion (Schmitt, 1991, p. 63), he also concludes that Däubler does not remain in the dualism, but allows for its transcendence—and in this, he adds, Däubler does not allow for the mood of distrust toward the world and humanity (Schmitt, 1991, p. 70). As Schmitt puts it in his 1917 essay on the visible church, the created world must be conceived of as inherently good and the evil in it as the product of human sinfulness (Schmitt, 1996a, p. 47).

In *Roman Catholicism and Political Form* from a few years later, we find related lines of argument. There, Schmitt acknowledges that the current epoch is ruled by a radical dualism that bases itself on a modern conception of technicity and soul, that is, *Geist*. However, in Schmitt's view, such a dualist conception is entirely alien to Catholicism, where "the Marcionitic either-or is answered with an as-well-as" within its *complexio oppositorum* (Schmitt, 1996b, p. 7). That this not to be understood as a dialectical reconciliation, as Schmitt explicitly remarks (Schmitt, 1996b, p. 9), is illustrated by the fact that Schmitt in his essay on "The Age of Neutralizations and

Depoliticizations" concludes that the struggle over technology should not be understood in the ultimately mechanistic terms of spirit against technology or any other form of dualism: "For life struggles not with death, spirit not with spiritlessness; spirit struggles with spirit, life with life, and out of the power of an integral understanding of this arises the order of human things" (Schmitt, 2007c, p. 95). At stake here is thus not a dualistic faith but a theory of how the dehumanizing dangers of modern dualistic thought can be countered and restrained. In Schmitt's view, the politicization of the concept of humanity produces the counter-concept on the non-human, which attaches to those who opposes or do not fit into the categorization of humanity as it is perceived by modern progressivism, "the pseudo-religion of humanity" as he calls it (Schmitt, 2009c, p. 110–111).

What emerges here is an image not of a secret Gnostic, but of someone in a continuous struggle with the implications of exactly that which his critics perceive of as modern Gnosticism. Schmitt's essay on the three possibilities of a Christian conception of history thus bridges the early critique of a dualistic mindset driven by modern technicity with the later questioning of the possibility of an overcoming of enmity under the banner of humanistic emancipation. The target of Schmitt's criticism is the idea of innerworldly salvation, or the immanentization of the *eschaton*, to use Eric Voegelin's phrase (Voegelin, 2000b). It is obvious that many of Schmitt's critics would prefer him and his political theology to be an exponent of the millenarian energies that consumed the world in the great confrontation of political systems during his lifetime. However, as some of his liberal readers have discovered, Schmitt's works contain important elements for a theory for militant democracy, with the strong state fulfilling the role as a guarantor of liberal institutions (see Schupmann, 2017).

Thus, it is possible to discern the basic elements of katechontic politics. Katechontism is a specific form of avertive apocalypticism oriented toward worldly politics, but without the idea of directing its eschatological convictions toward transcendence and salvation. On the contrary, the katechontic worldview regards the introduction of salvation and Messianic hope into politics as profoundly dangerous. It is also important to note the secular nature of the katechon itself. Even if it is endowed with an eschatological mission conceived within a horizon of apocalypticism, and thereby becomes sacralized, it remains a fundamentally secular agent, its field of operations being strictly those of worldly politics. The aim of katechontic politics is to avert the end and foreclose fundamental changes to the reigning order. It is a mythology of stability and restraint.

Reading Schmitt as a decisionist clearly aligns him with fascism but reading his work as an attempt at concrete order thinking opens an aligning of him with reactionary bourgeois politics, both theoretical and in practice. That project has been described very aptly as Schmitt's "authoritarian liberalism" by a line of thinkers, starting with Schmitt's contemporary Hermann Heller and continuing to this day (Cristi, 1998; Heller, 2015; Chamayou, 2021). Rather than a revolutionary reconfiguration of society, Schmitt's authoritarian politics were oriented toward a reactionary defense of bourgeois institutions, not least private property and state power, even if the endeavor was formulated in opposition to certain aspects of bourgeois ideology. This indicates that Schmitt's reactionary chronopolitical strategy is of wider importance and represents a more delicate problem for contemporary political thought. In times beset by intensifying apocalypticist visions, it is important to note that katechontism may become tempting for the forces of order. The fate of Schmitt's political endeavors should be seen as a warning of the fact that the politics of reactionary restraint may lead in completely different and presumably unintended directions.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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