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Marin Terpstra

The Management of Distinctions: Jacob Taubes on Paul's Political Theology

Abstract: Is it justified to depict Paul's letters as an example of political theology, as Taubes did in his Heidelberg lectures on *Romans* in 1987? The justification lies in the fact that as a founder of non-Jewish "Christian" communities Paul has to act as a politician. But he was a politician of a special kind, one who pretended to be called by God (or Christ) to be a spiritual leader with the task to establish a new people. To clarify this point, the author focuses on the way Paul manages distinctions (between Jews and non-Jews, between followers of Christ and those who stick to the world as it is, and so on) and on the impact of his theology on these distinctions. This impact relates to the intensification of distinctions. The extreme consequence of this is the distinction between friend and enemy. This possible consequence connects Taubes's reflections with Carl Schmitt's use of the term "political theology." It turns out that Paul's political theology cannot be taken in the sense Roman intellectuals already used the term (state cult), but points in another direction, a "Messianic" subversion of "the state." The author ends his paper with a comment on what Taubes called the "Gnostic temptation" hidden in this reversed political theology.

Some people do have a life after they die. Unfortunately, they do not have anything to say about their own fate in this afterlife. Their fate and identity is in the hands of those that tell and retell stories about those that walked the earth and left traces of their existence and above all, their actions. These stories have a life of their own. Of course, those that tell these stories or write them down are often sincere in their attempt to do justice to the person they talk about. Nevertheless, even this kind of stories differ from each other and may even become quite conflicting. After this introduction, it must be clear that I am not going to talk about Paul, but will give a comment on some of these stories. It is not Paul but these stories that have shaped our world view. One of these stories is put forward by Jacob Taubes (born in 1923), a philosopher who is as closely connected to non-orthodox Jewish thought as he also is to non-conformist and anti-capitalist movements.¹

The lectures on Paul, delivered shortly before he died in 1987, are a kind of personal testament, but they nevertheless have a significance that goes beyond

1 For a short but elucidating portrait see Muller, "Reisender in Ideen."

that.² My aim in this paper is to pick out a single theme from these lectures, one which in my view has not gotten very much attention. This theme is the management of distinctions in a situation of regime change, a situation that is at hand when one, like Paul, tries to found a community or a people on the basis of a new covenant with God. As Taubes makes explicit in the second part of his lectures (“Effects. Paul and Modernity: Transfigurations of the Messianic”), Paul’s texts show an ambivalence that is still part of contemporary philosophy because of formulations that could be read in a Gnostic way. For Taubes, Paul is not the founding father of the Christian Church, but a Jew confronted with a Messiah that tended to break away from the Jewish tradition, but was part of this tradition too. The ambivalence of founding new communities of faith in Christ is connected to the first attempt, in the second century, to establish an orthodox Christian Church, an attempt greatly inspired by Paul’s interventions. This attempt was made by a Gnostic “heretic,” Marcion, who was then excluded from the Christian community. This orthodoxy wanted to free itself completely from the Jewish inheritance, and therefore accepted only the Gospels and the letters of Paul as its foundation. The formula of this break with Israel is the rejection of the Creator-God and the God of the Moses’s Laws, and the sole affirmation of the Savior-God, the Father of the Messiah. The believers hope for liberation from this evil world, its political and religious order, and its worldly wisdom. If we take away the weird mythology connected to this fundamentally new theological scheme, a mythology that constitutes one variety from the range of Gnostic world views, we can register something very familiar to the modern ear. Indeed, what we encounter may suggest that we are here at the birthplace of the very idea of modernity: the endeavor to overcome the past radically, by way of a total rupture, and to move in the direction of a new and better world.

Taubes chose the following title for his lectures: “On the Political Theology of Paul: From Polis to Ecclesia (for advanced students only).”³ The theme of regime change is clearly present in this title, as is the reason for the concept of political theology. In this case, a community inspired by a “theology” announcing the appearance of the Messiah (or the Messianic) in history is set against the established political order. My aim in this text will be to elaborate on the plausibility of such a reading of Paul. The first question is: can we read Paul as a political thinker? The second question is: while it is obvious that Paul is a theologian (he talks about God), how can we say that his theology is connected

² Taubes, *Die politische Theologie des Paulus*.

³ *Ibid.*, 145/117. When quoting from the translation, the second page number refers to the translation and the first one to the original.

to the political? The third question arises because the concept of political theology is, at least for Taubes, derived from Schmitt's famous or notorious essay entitled "Politische Theologie," which was published in 1922.⁴ Thus, the question that arises is: how are Taubes's lectures related to Schmitt's essay? This question is relevant because of the confrontation they had concerning Paul—a confrontation between a German lawyer who became part of the Nazi regime and a Jewish philosopher who sympathized with the 1968 student revolts. Is this reference to Schmitt justified if we want to tell the story of Paul? I will show that the confrontation between Schmitt and Taubes rests on the idea of the intensification of a distinction as the connection between the political and the theological. This point will lead us finally to a short reflection on the "Gnostic temptation" that lies hidden in the problematic.

Before elaborating on these questions, let me first summarize the main point. For Taubes, the current meaning of Paul concerns the fate of the Jews in European history, that is, in Christian history. The revelation of Christ can be seen to have the following consequence: Jews become the enemies of God (Rom. 11:25; see also 1 Thess. 2:15–16). Taubes's argument with Schmitt focused on this theme in Paul. For Schmitt, all distinctions in the political world finally merge into only one distinction, that between friend and enemy.⁵ So, the phrase "enemies of God" is a genuinely political one. Marcion is the Christian theologian who proposed a sharp distinction between the Jews and the followers of Christ, between the first and the second covenant, between the Creator-God of the Torah and the Savior-God of the New Testament. The revival of Marcionism within liberal currents in Protestantism in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, which claimed that we can do without this authoritarian God of the Old Testament, signifies for Taubes the cultural climate in which anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism could develop.⁶ Taubes's distrust of liberalism in general has to do with his diagnosis that the liberal cultural climate in Germany did not prevent it to become the site of the Holocaust. Whatever one may think of this impudent assertion, this context makes clear that the core of the problem

⁴ The third essay in Schmitt, *Political Theology*.

⁵ Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*.

⁶ Taubes, *Die Politische Theologie des Paulus*, 78 ff./55 ff., comments on the impact of an influential book on Marcion, published in 1921, by the German liberal theologian Adolf von Harnack (see his *Marcion*). The theme of Gnosticism and modernity was debated since Blumenberg's *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* by a group called "Hermeneutics and Poetics," in which Taubes also participated. Seminars by members of this group led to the publication of three volumes on political theology, Gnosis and politics, and theocracy, which were edited by Taubes under the title *Religionstheorie und Politische Theologie*.

is the way people deal with distinctions. That is the dramatic background of Taubes's attempt to show (1) that the popular anti-Semitism fostered within the Roman Catholic Church in connection to Paul is ill-founded, (2) that Paul remained a Jew in his thought and reasoning, and tried to prevent a total breach between followers of Christ and those Jews that rejected Christ, and (3) that Paul did not establish a church but was the founder of communities based on love, not hate.⁷ This should be enough of an overview to understand the subsequent sections of this paper, which deal with Paul's politics (1), his political theology (2), the relation between Taubes and Schmitt (3), and the "Gnostic temptation" (4).

1 Paul's Politics

Distinctions are the stuff the human world is made of. Paul is fully aware of what it means to establish communities of people distinguishing themselves from other people by particular principles, that is, distinctions. The core of his letters presents his attempts to manage these communities from a distance. This obvious fact may lead to a reading of Paul's letters in which the text is seen as part of a political praxis and as an articulation of the agonistic relations between different social groups (Jews, Jewish Christians, non-Jewish Christians, pagan Romans and so on). For me, Paul's letters are not diaries or other textual forms of expressing personal experiences; nor are they primarily philosophical or theological treatises. Above all, the letters are constitutional texts, more like the *Federal Papers* or the *Communist Manifesto*, than *The Confessions*—Augustine's or Rousseau's—or a phenomenology of religion *à la* Heidegger. Of course, in Paul's letters we find, to varying degrees, traces of ancient philosophical debates, religious movements from the time and personal experiences. We can read Paul's letters intertextually or as the thinking through of a Messianic experience. Jacob Taubes, however, more than other contemporary readers like Alain Badiou and Giorgio Agamben, was aware of the fact that the texts have a strategic and tactical meaning in the *polemical* context of the formation of early Christianity. Paul was not only a self-appointed apostle, preaching the message of Christ to non-Jews, that is, not a "legitimate" member of the peer group of those that lived with Jesus of Nazareth. He also had to fight for the maintenance of the communities he had founded against internal and external threats. The message of Paul is for us not only part of the history of ideas, but also part of a project of

⁷ Explicitly in Taubes, *Die Politische Theologie des Paulus*, 72ff./51ff.

transmission: materializing words (“the truth”) into a stable community (“the body of Christ”).⁸ His letters are full of implicit and explicit references to the conflicts inherent to such a project. This means that in these letters Paul’s main concern is the *identity* of these communities (1 Cor. 1:10ff.), the faith that holds them together (Rom. 1:11ff.) and the way they have to guard themselves against disintegration (2 Cor. 12:20; Rom. 16:17ff.). This is what I will call the management of distinctions.

To understand the politics of Paul, it is therefore necessary to clarify what is meant by distinctions.⁹

- (i) The identity of everything is based on a distinction. A is A because it is distinguished from not-A and because not-A encompasses other things: A is A because it is not B, C and so on. Addressing the followers of Jesus Christ always means at the same time affirming that there are those who are not followers and that among those there are Jews and Romans (or Greeks).¹⁰ Or if we talk about universalism, we must suppose that there is also non-universalism and that within that there is ethnicism, nationalism and so forth.
- (ii) Distinctions will repeat themselves within one or both sides of the distinction. If we distinguish God from not-God, for example the world, then in the world there are things that refer to God and things that are contrary to God. The human mind is divided into ψυχή (oriented to the world) and πνεῦμα (directed to God). If we distinguish the followers of Christ from Jews, then we can distinguish within the side of the followers of Christ between those who resemble the Jews and those who do not resemble the Jews (i. e., circumcised or not).
- (iii) This multiplication of distinctions can be further elaborated by combining distinctions, by replacing one distinction with another, by eliminating distinctions, or by arranging distinctions in a different way. Hence, the followers of Christ can be associated with light, the good, love, liberation, knowledge, the new, weakness, purity, whereas the unbelievers can be associated with darkness, evil, law, slavery, worldly wisdom, the old, power and impurity. The human world is a complex of distinctions that assemble to create identities. It also creates order and disorder. This makes clear what a political reading of Paul implies: understanding the use of philosophical

8 Debray, *Transmettre*.

9 Especially useful for me was Baecker, *Form und Formen der Kommunikation*; this approach derives from sociological systems theory as put forward in Luhmann, *Social Systems*.

10 A thorough study of Paul’s letters from this perspective would require a book-length study; I apologize for merely giving some examples familiar to those who already know Paul’s letters without entering into exegetic details.

and religious topics as attempts to separate the group of the faithful from those that are outside, those that will be doomed, destroyed or lost, those that cannot be trusted or should be kept at a distance, and so on.¹¹ Paul's letters are full of these kinds of distinctions.

- (iv) A further step has to be taken in order to grasp the full meaning of this political hermeneutics. It will turn out to be a crucial one. Distinctions can be cognitive, communicative and institutional. All distinctions are cognitive: we cannot think without distinctions. Not all distinctions are communicative, but only those people actually talk about. Institutional distinctions are distinctions that function as frames of communication and thought: they determine what is included and excluded in human interaction. If followers of Christ *as* followers of Christ talk to Jews, that is, if people belonging to one group or social system talk to people belonging to another group or social system, then the distinction is institutional. The important thing here is: how decisive, strict, strong or established is the institutional distinction? Does it exclude communication or even thoughts that use other distinctions? For example, orthodoxy means that one belongs to this group on the condition that one accepts this particular distinction, such as that between the old and the new covenant. Institutional distinctions can function less rigidly: there can be tolerance of people discussing certain distinctions. Communication and thought are potentially subversive for institutional distinctions: if thought and talk about an institutional distinction is allowed, its authority is put in question. If people have very different ideas about the distinction between followers of Christ and Jews, and discuss them openly, the institutional distinction between these groups becomes fluid. Everyone who carefully reads the letters of Paul (e.g., Rom. 14) knows that he is principally concerned with this problem: how can this group of people be stabilized, what distinctions are crucial, what distinctions are secondary, how to deal with people who give different interpretations of a distinction or make other distinctions, and so on. In Paul's letters, we witness the transformation of the distinction between followers of Christ and non-followers of Christ *internal* to the Jewish community, which is itself distinguished from the Gentiles or Greeks, to the distinction between followers of Christ and non-followers of Christ in which the distinction between Jews and Gentiles/Greeks becomes secondary on both sides of

11 A theoretical justification of this political reading can be found in Kondylis, *Macht und Entscheidung*.

the distinction or is eliminated.¹² Although Paul aims to address all human beings, his political calculations are based on the assumption that many people will not adhere. Political praxis dealing with distinctions on an institutional and communicative level, therefore, cannot be universal.¹³

- (v) Finally, distinctions have logical and polemical consequences. With regard to their logical consequences, we are interested in the consistency of all the basic distinctions made. In thought or even in communication, this should not be a problem, but in the human world logical consequence leads to rigid social systems, and it may therefore have severe polemical consequences. Here one has to decide which distinctions really matter and which distinctions can be taken less rigorously. Marcion can be seen as a Christian theologian who wanted to make theology more consistent.¹⁴ One cannot accept that the God who created and governs this world is the same God that liberates man from this evil world (Gal. 1:4). It is contradictory to assume that God wants to free us from the world he himself created. So, we must get rid of the God of this world and rely exclusively on the message of the Savior-God. This is logically consequent. It also has polemical consequences, such as the expulsion of the Jews from the Christian world or even the intellectual and finally physical annihilation of the Jews, as Jacob Taubes and others have suggested.

To summarize, politics is about managing distinctions: who belongs to our society, on what conditions, within what institutional frames and so on? To manage distinctions properly, decisions must be made, and the consequences of these decisions must be taken care of. That is what political action is about. At the same time, institutional distinctions are always challenged. People propose other distinctions, conceive of a different possible society and so on. In this respect, what Paul is doing in his letters is political in a very simple and elementary way. The greatest part of his texts poses no real problems to interpretation if

12 A variation can be found in Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 47ff., where emphasis is placed on the fact that whatever distinctions one makes there will be a “remnant” that does not fit.

13 Badiou's attempts to show that the elimination of the distinction between “Jews” and “Greeks” marks the opening of a new way of political thought that foreshadows Marx's universalistic idea of the emancipation of humans from all social determinations and therefore all social and political inequality. This is unconvincing because the distinction between “Jews” and “Greeks” is merely *subordinated to a new distinction*, hence becoming obsolete. See Badiou, *Saint Paul*.

14 This is a central claim in Blumenberg's account of the problem (*Legitimität der Neuzeit*, 141ff.) that is basic for Taubes's reflection on Paul.

one takes the management of distinctions in order to establish social cohesion to be the essence of politics. The real problem or enigma lies in the theological part that is connected to this management of distinctions.

2 Paul's Political Theology

A modern, sociological concept of contingency looks like this: draw a distinction and see how it works. Social systems emerge as more or less complex networks of stabilized distinctions that have proved themselves to be successful frames of human communication. At the same time, we more or less accept that other distinctions are possible. Society could and, indeed, shall be different. This also applies to our modern concept of liberal and democratic politics, which is based on the acceptance that in the realm of thought and public discourse alternative distinctions can be brought in. It can be claimed, for example, that the distinction between ecological responsibility and irresponsibility is more important than the distinction between economic growth and shrinkage or vice versa. Political theology comes in when a distinction is not a contingent starting point of an evolution that fails or succeeds, and is not an issue in public debate, but a truth that is already there, enclosed in a theo-cosmic order or revealed by the plain decision of a deity that demands obedience and loyalty.

Paul's political theology is not that of the Romans (*theologia civilis* or πολιτική). For them, political theology is the theology of statesmen, distinguished from the theology of poets and that of philosophers.¹⁵ The Romans recognized that one could talk in different ways about the gods (or the one god). Political theology is part of the state cult of Rome, ritual practices that are an integrated ingredient of political life. For the Romans, the gods were partners in the city and in the world, with whom one has to cooperate, and who demand respect and honoring (*pietas*).¹⁶ The gods are part of the vicissitudes of history: one has to have them on one's side if one wants to succeed. The political order should also be loyal to the ancestors and the founders of the city, and therefore respect their religion. The intellectual elite of Rome, like that of Athens, might also dedicate itself to the philosophical way of life, that is to natural theology which they claimed to be the mimetic representation of original religion.¹⁷ Philosophical life makes man a member of a new and different πόλις or *civitas*.

¹⁵ Lieberg, "The Theologia Tripertita."

¹⁶ Scheid, *Religion et piété à Rome*.

¹⁷ See also Van Kooten, "Pagan and Jewish Monotheism according to Varro, Plutarch and St Paul."

Christianity, as Nietzsche formulated it, is “Platonism for the people,” and in this sense a continuation of dual citizenship.¹⁸ Although it may be justifiable to read in Paul's letters the traces of philosophical debates, a political hermeneutics of his texts shows that Paul's political theology is more in line with that of the Jews: it is theocratic, not anthropocratic (Rom. 9:16). The philosophers lived as men of flesh and bone in earthly cities as well as in the cosmic or ideal city that has a divine glamour: the city they dreamed and talked about. Paul is talking about a city that is founded by God. Theocracy, as Flavius Josephus says in his *Contra Apionem* (early second century), is a fourth kind of political order, not ruled by one person, an elite or the many, but by God and those who represent God in this world, the priests.¹⁹ Between the God that created the world and rules it, and its subjects, there exists a more or less complex hierarchy of mediators. As a subject, man is dependent on these mediators (Rom. 10). The question therefore is: who are the true mediators of God's rule in this world and what do these mediators tell us about God's will?²⁰

The God of Paul is an absolute ruler who demands complete loyalty. We should bear in mind that there is not a sharp line separating gods from sacral kings, or sacral kings from gods; the theo-political language is the same.²¹ Sometimes this language is militant (for example, 2 Cor. 10:3–4, 11:13–15). Its focus then is on foundation, sovereignty and hierarchy. Those who are not loyal and obedient will be defeated or even destroyed. The theocratic regime leads to a particular political psychology. Paul depicts himself as a former fanatic Jew who tried to be strict in following God's laws (Gal. 1:13f, 6:17; cf. Philem. 3:5–6), but he seems to have despaired about his fate and that of all people (Rom. 3:10ff.). The enigma of his theology is not only that until now God accepted transgression, but that in fact no man ever succeeded in living according to the laws completely. We see in this a very rigid use of the distinction loyal versus disloyal to God (law-abiding or transgressing the law), with the result that all people are categorized on the wrong side of the distinction. The first covenant failed, concludes Paul (Rom. 11:7). The good news of Christ, as a son of God the primary mediator between God and his subjects, is that God is not merciless but wants to give humankind a second chance. I will not dwell on the complex question of the law in the thought of Paul. What matters is the difference be-

18 Nietzsche, “Forword,” in *Beyond Good and Evil*. See especially Van Kooten, “Philosophical Criticism of Genealogical Claims and Stoic Depoliticization of Politics.”

19 Cancik, “Theokratie und Priesterschaft.”

20 Metaphors like this can be found in *Hebrews*, which is not a letter written by Paul but can be seen to be written in his spirit: Heb. 3:1, 4:14, 5:1f., 6:16, 7:2–3, 12:9.

21 See Oakley, *Kingship*.

tween the Roman political theology, in which honoring the gods is part of the consolidation of political power in the Roman Empire, and the theocratic political theology, in which the sole question is what and who represents God in this world. The distinction between God and world divides the world itself. For theocracy, the founding distinctions of the social world of humans are not man-made, but are revealed in one way or another. Paul sees himself as the messenger (merely a slave, not separable from the source of his message) of a *change of divine regime* announced by the Son of God, who says that the covenant between God and his people, the Jews, is no longer valid and that a new covenant is established (Rom. 2:17ff.). This new covenant is already at work after Christ's resurrection and will be effectuated fully as soon as Christ returns from heaven to establish a new kingdom. In the meantime, the task that has been set is to save as many people as possible and to prepare them to be members of the mystical body of Christ. We know that this idea "in the meantime," the time between the resurrection of Christ and his second coming, is a key concept in the contemporary discussion of Paul. This is only a consequence of what is the core of the message: a change of regime in God's rule of the world or even a change in the kind of God that rules. Because of this theocratic core of Paul's political practice, it is justifiable to talk about Paul's political theology. This can mean more than one thing, however.

3 Taubes and Schmitt: Intensification of a Distinction

Taubes and Schmitt do not disagree about the idea that "political theology" is an appropriate approach in the history of political ideas. Nor do they disagree that Paul's political discourse is about absolute loyalty to God or that politics as the management of distinctions is ultimately based on the concept of sovereignty. Sovereignty is the key concept in Schmitt's essay on political theology. It refers to the authority who makes the decisions that establish political order, that is, the normative foundation of a given society or people. Sovereign is the authority which decides in the state of exception, a state in which the normative order of society is in crisis.²² In this situation, only one thing counts: who is friend, who is

²² See the first essay in Schmitt, *Political Theology*. Agamben is right in saying that in this state of exception the law, that is, the normality of a society, is unobservable and unformulable, and that it therefore opens a perspective beyond the law, which he calls the "Messianic." Unfortunately, he does not elaborate on the connection between the twofold perspective that opens

enemy? The basic decision concerns who is for us and who is against us—supposing there is a “we” that can pose such a question. The point is that this “we” must be established first, and it can only be established by making a distinction. In Paul's case, we are simply told that such a decision has been made by God, that this decision was revealed by Jesus Christ, and that Paul was summoned to spread this revelation among mankind.

The key problem of political theology, therefore, is the intensification of a distinction. The final logical and polemical consequences of a distinction appear when the distinction becomes a matter of life and death for those who adhere to it—whether “life and death” is taken literally or metaphorically. It is the existential meaning of a distinction that forces the adherents to view their adversaries as enemies.²³ But the intensification of a distinction can take on many forms. Extreme dualism can lead to war between groups, or it can lead to attempts of eliminating the other side of the distinction; it can also lead to Puritanism, isolation or withdrawal from all contact with the other side of the distinction. It is clear that in Paul's letters the violent forms are left to God: he will destroy. Paul himself struggles with the degree of intensification that is needed to manage and maintain the communities he has founded. Political theology is about the way people have to deal with the distinctions revealed by the highest authority. Nevertheless, there are different political theologies.

As I have said, Schmitt and Taubes agree about the central idea of the intensification of distinctions, but they disagree about the forms this can take. For Schmitt, as a scholar of constitutional law, the emphasis is on distinctions at an institutional level, the foundations of the political order of a given group or people. Like conservative officials of the Roman Catholic Church, Schmitt saw radicalized Christianity (liberation theology for example) as a danger to the established order. His position is often compared to that of Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor. For Taubes, it seems, distinctions have weight on a cognitive and a communicative level. He defends the spiritual against the secular realm, although he fully acknowledges the fact that in our world political intensification is what counts. Both read Paul's letters as constitutional texts, but they disagree about the kind of community that is established by Paul.²⁴

up as soon as institutional distinctions collapse: concentration camps in which “everything becomes possible” (after civil rights are abolished) or a community based on love, not law (after the law is “fulfilled”). See Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 104 ff.

²³ Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 26: “The distinction of friend and enemy denotes the utmost degree of intensity of a union or separation, of an association or dissociation.”

²⁴ The opposition at stake is, I think, well formulated in Georgi, “Gott auf den Kopf stellen.”

One important issue is how we relate Rom. 13 to the announcement of the collapse of this world and its powers. In the opening verses of Rom. 13, Paul affirms that the world as it is, with its ruling powers, its hierarchy and its wisdom, is the work of God. The political theology of Paul is the theology of subjects who will always remain subjected and should therefore conform to whatever rules are in place. The real question is who really rules. Along these lines, the development of the “Christian” communities into a church that became a spiritual power within a political order was seen by many Christian thinkers as the fulfillment of God’s promise. The Roman Empire was part of God’s plan of salvation. This made a Christian political theology look more and more like the Roman political theology.²⁵ One could even imagine that from this point of view the *παρουσία* should be postponed until the church succeeded in gathering all people within its borders, except those stubborn sinners who remained loyal to the antichrist. Christianity thus lost its subversive potential, at least until the Final Judgement. In gross terms, this is the theological stance of Carl Schmitt: Paul is the founding father of the Roman Catholic Church, and our loyalty should be with this spiritual power.

For Taubes, as a Jewish thinker, the church’s move to eliminate the Mosaic inheritance by appropriating it within its own system (as the prehistory and announcement of Christ’s rule) is unacceptable. For him, this is not even a point of discussion. His argument against Schmitt is focused on the reading of Paul. Taubes gives a more apocalyptic interpretation of the same passage (Rom. 13): because the world is at the point of collapsing and being replaced by a new world, why bother about this world? Revolting against this world is a waste of precious time, as is worrying about one’s earthly concerns.²⁶ This interpretation is only possible when the God that established power in this world is of no importance and if this God is, in the last analysis, not the God that will free us from the sufferings of this world and its political order. The only thing that interests Taubes in Paul’s writings is his struggle between the ultimate consequence of Christ’s message of salvation and his bond with the people to whom he belongs. The logical consequence of God’s decision is that the Jews that do not recognize Christ are enemies and will be defeated. According to Taubes, Paul resists this consequence. Who are we to judge the Jews? Let God decide. Perhaps, though Paul claims he knows for certain, God has a plan that will save the Jews in

²⁵ This interpretation, connected to Eusebius of Caesarea, was still defended more or less by Carl Schmitt in 1970 in his answer to Erik Peterson’s thesis that Christianity is incompatible with political theology: *Political Theology II*.

²⁶ Taubes, *Die Politische Theologie des Paulus*, 58/40 f.

the end. Indeed, Paul's mission to spread Christ's message to non-Jews is part of this plan: making the Jews jealous and thereby seducing them to join the group.²⁷

4 The “Gnostic Temptation”

I hope that the foregoing sections have sufficiently clarified the reasons for understanding Paul's letters as examples of political theology. Whether these reasons are convincing or not is left for the reader to decide. In addition, I want to say something about the significance of all this for contemporary political philosophy and its dealing with Paul. I am not a philologist, a historian of ideas or a sociologist, so my interest is not to understand Paul's letters intertextually or as interventions imbedded in a particular socio-historical setting. My aim in this paper has been to show that the concept of political theology relates to a problem that can be summarized with reference to three concepts: distinctions, contingency and loyalty. (1) Distinctions are involved in the constitution of identity, but also in the processes of the change or dissolution of identity. (2) Contingency means that a distinction can always be challenged, that another distinction can be drawn, that a distinction can be taken in a less strict way, and so on. This relates distinctions to the question of the exception: “The question is whether you think the exception is possible ...”²⁸ (3) The question of loyalty or disloyalty arises when distinctions and their contingency take a social, institutional or political form.

The intervention of the divine in the shape of a revelation, incarnation or related manifestation, that is, the appearance of the “theological” in the domain of mental operations, communication and social institutions, introduces a new distinction in this complex field. It is not just a matter of constituting, maintaining or undermining worldly powers. A new dimension is configured, one which Benjamin called “göttliche Gewalt” (“divine violence”) in his “Zur Kritik der Gewalt.”²⁹ At least, if we view the divine as something which is not “of this world,” but nevertheless can be present “in this world,” the conjunction of dis-

²⁷ For more details about the argument between Taubes and Schmitt see my article “God's Love for His Enemies.”

²⁸ Taubes, *Die Politische Theologie des Paulus*, 118/85. For further explanation of this aspect of Taubes's thought see Terpstra and de Wit, “No spiritual investment in the world as it is.”

²⁹ “if mythic violence is law making, divine violence is law-destroying ... if mythic violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine violence only expiates ...” (Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” 249).

inctions, contingency and loyalty turns a new chapter. This chapter is especially connected to Jewish and Christian articulations of the conjunction, of which Paul is a major example. Here we find the different notions of eschatology, apocalypticism, messianism and Gnosticism. In divergent ways, they all point to the establishment of a new distinction (a new community or way of life) that is not seen as merely something people think or talk about, but neither is it something which already takes an institutional or political form. It certainly is something social: people gather in the name of this new distinction. Of interest for political philosophy is the meaning of this “in-between”: what actually exists between an established power (as far as power can be established) and possibilities which have not taken shape institutionally and politically—or even cosmologically. This “in-between” can take the form of longing or waiting for changes that will come (eschatology), of expecting the destruction of the world as it is now (apocalypticism) or of being aware of that which shall liberate us or even has already liberated us from the world as it is (messianism).

In a conversation on partisans and militants in revolutionary processes, in this case the regime change led by Mao Tse-Tung in post-war China, Carl Schmitt makes an interesting remark on Christianity which shows why Jacob Taubes could see in his “enemy” also a thinker akin to his own thought. This is what Schmitt says:

These events, however, remind me of the history of Christianity, which started with the total repudiation of the world of that time, the Roman Empire, and with a total calling into question of the world, and soon organized itself on Roman soil, in the catacombs, hidden beneath the earth, literally underground. [...] And what happened with this total repudiation in the end? After Constantine it became a religion of the state and in the end became a centralized organization with an infallible bishop in Rome [...].³⁰

This comparison between Christianity and militant Marxism is of interest because some of the prominent writers on Paul these days have a connection to militant Marxism.³¹ Paul has become something of an icon for contemporary left-wing political thinkers looking for an idea of revolution or regime change that can avert the disastrous totalitarian regimes in which previous communist experiments have ended. Here we find another parallel: the “new prophets” Weber foresaw as a possible answer to the total transformation of Christian (prot-

³⁰ Schickel, *Gespräche mit Carl Schmitt*, 26; my translation.

³¹ Badiou compares Paul with Lenin (Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 2), in Badiou's and Agamben's book the allusion to the “human emancipation” in Marx's *Zur Judenfrage* (1843) is present as a shadow. Unfortunately, I cannot elaborate on this here.

estant) culture in the “iron cages” of capitalist society,³² a protest of the remains of Christianity against its integration into the world as it is. This is the problem of “the Messianic.” Agamben is a clear example of this attempt at a total liberation of philosophy and politics from the past. The sharp, intensified distinction between, on the one hand, the disaster of ethical thought that stretches from the ancient world to contemporary sociology and, on the other, “the coming philosophy” reminds us of the kind of “cultural Marcionism” typical of modernity (Brague).³³ Marcionism means the withdrawal from the old world, the expectation of a new world that is not the restitution of an original state, and the rejection of reforms, which presuppose that something in the existing world is good. The preceding section might shed some light on this debate by showing that there are a wide variety of possible solutions to the problem of the intensification of distinctions.

The “Gnostic temptation” can be described as the intensification of the distinction between the divine (“the other world”) and the world (“this world”, “the world as it is”) which affects all other distinctions.³⁴ The radical withdrawal from the world expresses that the “logic” of this world, or the ἀρχόντες ruling this world, is a realm totally different from everything that has to do with true life. Taubes himself tried to resist this temptation, as he claims Paul did too, but it is a constant force of attraction. He refers to himself as an “apocalyptic,” whose main commitment was to defend the distinction between secular and spiritual power, which he sees as “absolutely necessary” for preventing Western thought from suffocating. Against Schmitt’s “totalitarian temptation” with its stress on the need for a strict defense of the political distinction between friend and enemy, Taubes pleads for the mind to remain resistant to any apology for the world: no spiritual investment in the world as it is.³⁵ What I called the “in-between” is, I think, a plausible interpretation of this distinction between the mind that is free from the world (πνεῦμα) and the mind that is invested in the world (ψυχή); it names a space needed simply for calculating the best way to

32 See Taubes, “Einleitung.”

33 See for example Agamben, *Opus Dei*. “Cultural Marcionism” is a term coined by Brague, and it fits well with a thinker who views the whole philosophical tradition and Western civilization to be catastrophic and aberrant, one for whom the only hope is the “coming philosophy.” See Brague, *Eccentric Culture*, 57, 111, and 180 ff.

34 In a preparatory text for the conference on “Gnostics and Politics” (1980) Taubes (in collaboration with Wolfgang Hübener) makes clear that he sees the socio-historical study of the “Gnostic temptation” as the central issue. See Kopp-Oberstebrink, Palzhoff, and Tremel, *Jacob Taubes-Carl Schmitt*, 227.

35 Taubes, *Die Politische Theologie des Paulus*, 139/103; the origin of this phrase, in English and italics in the original German text, is unclear.

live in this world. To give in to the “Gnostic temptation” is to give up on the attempt to save the space for this “in-between.”

The core of what I have been trying to say concerns our attitude towards distinctions that are intensified in the form of institutions or even in ontologies grounding society as a whole. There is thus a “totalitarian temptation” that one should resist without giving in to the “Gnostic temptation.” Paul’s letters can provide a fascinating example of an attempt to deal with this problem. Taubes is especially interested in the way Paul explains the distinction between law and love, connecting it to a merciless and a merciful God. Mercy and love point to the same thing: the possibility that a distinction is postponed, an exception is granted or even an annihilation made possible. This is the “apocalyptic”: everything that is established can be declared null and void. Taubes’s illustration is the Jewish feast of Yom Kippur insofar as it imitates God’s power to forgive.³⁶ There are no absolute distinctions, because the mind is always free to think of other possibilities, and so people will always be willing to put these possibilities into practice.

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³⁶ Ibid., 43 ff./28 ff.

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