

Political Theology: Origins, Concepts, and Contradictions

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journals.sagepub.com/home/tcs**Mikkel Flohr** 

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Abstract

Political theology is a flourishing field of research, examining the various ways in which modern political ideas, institutions, and practices have been and continue to be shaped by theology. However, conceptualizations of political theology are often implicit and diverge widely. This article traces the origins and development of the multiple meanings of the concept to reorient contemporary research and debates on the topic. It argues that Carl Schmitt's *Political Theology* provided the first modern determination of political theology and shaped the field fundamentally. It also shows that this central work actually contained three discrete conceptions of political theology, which it reconstructs alongside their complex and contradictory interrelations and implications for subsequent research on political theology. The article differentiates these three conceptions of political theology and develops an analysis of their interrelations that can and should be used to reorient and advance contemporary research on political theology.

Keywords

political theology, political theory, religion, Carl Schmitt, secularization, sovereignty

Political theology is a flourishing field of research that examines the ways in which theological ideas, organizations and practices have shaped contemporary political ideas, institutions, and practices. It has formed the starting point of successful investigations and new insights into the persistence of religious forms, conceptual structures, and dynamics in formally secularized domains, such as the modern state and legal system (see especially Schmitt, 2006 [1922/1934]; Kelsen, 1973 [1922–23]), the economy (Agamben, 2017: 363–641; Dean, 2012, 2018; Heron, 2018), as well as more recent phenomena such as neoliberalism (Kotsko, 2018), the War on Terror (Agamben, 2017: 161–245; Turner, 2002), populism (Arato, 2013; Christiaens, 2023), the proliferation of border walls (Brown, 2010), and much more.¹ However, political theology is frequently

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conceptualized in divergent and sometimes even contradictory ways in the literature. This article identifies the historical and conceptual origins of these divergences in Carl Schmitt's *Political Theory* (Schmitt, 2006 [1922/1934]) and differentiates three different conceptions of political theology, which can help resolve the current conceptual confusion and contradictions in the literature.

The first section of the article traces the historical use of the concept of political theology through the works of St. Augustine of Hippo, Benedict de Spinoza, and Mikhail Alexandrovich Bakunin to show that Schmitt's *Political Theory* constitutes the first positive modern formulation(s) of the concept, which was created in implicit dialogue with these predecessors without being reducible to them. Sections two and three provide a close reading of significant passages of Schmitt's central work, showing that it contains not just one but three different conceptions of political theology, which I conceptualize in terms of 'transfer', 'correspondence', and 'decisionism'. The article reconstructs Schmitt's initial conception of political theology as a historical *transfer* and transformation of theological concepts in early modern political theory (*qua* secularization), which produced structural parallels between these fields since they are organized around the idea of an absolute and transcendent authority (God and the state). It then reconstructs Schmitt's subsequent (re-)conception of political theology as the synchronic structural *correspondence* between theological conceptions of God and notions of legitimate government. This leads to an interrogation of Schmitt's identification of political theology with his normative political doctrine of *decisionism* and/as the investment of the sovereign power to decide on the state of exception in a single person as the condition of possibility of any legal system. The fourth and final section analyzes the interrelations and contradictions between these three concepts of political theology and argues that they both can and should be disentangled in the contemporary literature.

Conceptual Origins

The origin of the concept of political theology is commonly identified as Carl Schmitt's eponymous book from 1922, and Schmitt was more than happy to affirm this. In a 1952 letter to Armin Mohler he explained that 'the coining of the term "political theology" in fact comes from me' (cited in Meier, 2011: 202n48) and later, in his 1970 *Political Theory II*, he repeated Erik Peterson's (mistaken) claim that he (Schmitt) had 'introduced the phrase "political theology" to the literature' (Peterson, 2011: 233n168; Schmitt, 2008 [1928]: 35). While Schmitt should be credited as the first to have developed the modern concept of 'political theology' systematically as part of a positive analytical project, his claims are misleading. There are three precedents. Schmitt actually identified the first of them later in *Political Theory II*, classifying the '*theologia politica* or *civilis* of Graeco-Roman antiquity' as a relevant historical precedent, contrary to his own prior claims (Schmitt, 2014 [1970]: 64–6).

The antique origins of the concept of political theology are obscure and almost no sources have survived. It is primarily known through St. Augustine's extensive discussion and critique of Quintus Mucius Scaevola Pontifex, Marcus Terentius Varro and Lucius Annaeus Seneca in *City of God* (Augustine, 1998: 176–84, 241–311). According to Augustine (1998), the concept first appeared as part of the Stoics' tripartite division of

theology into mythical, physical and political theologies (p. 265). He identified what the Romans rendered into Latin as '*theologia civilis*' with their instrumental deployment of (pagan) beliefs, cultic practices and public rituals to ensure social cohesion and political legitimacy (Augustine, 1998: 176, 182, 263–4, 302, 318). Augustine (1998) insisted that in Christianity, on the contrary, 'no attention is paid to any differences in the customs, laws, and institutions by which earthly peace is achieved or maintained [. . .] provided only that they do not impede the religion by which we are taught that the one supreme and true God is to be worshipped' (pp. 946–7). The concepts of political and civil theology retained these negative (pagan) connotations in most subsequent Christian theology, inhibiting the development of an explicit political theology within this tradition (Meier, 2011: 200; Thiem, 2014: 2809).²

While this is certainly a relevant terminological precursor, there are reasons to doubt that it had any direct influence on Schmitt. Firstly, neither Augustine nor any of his classical adversaries appear in Schmitt's 1922 text and nothing suggests that he was familiar with them at the time. Even in the subsequent *Political Theology II* where Schmitt mentions them, his engagement remains superficial at best, providing an incorrect reference to Augustine's *City of God* and entirely ignoring his critique of political theology. Had the Catholic Schmitt been familiar with the latter, he would, presumably, have been compelled to address it (Meier, 2011: 202n48, 200). Secondly, the classical concept referring to the cult of the Roman state in antiquity both could and should be differentiated from the concept of political theology pertaining specifically to 'the modern theory of the state' Schmitt elaborated in *Political Theology* (Schmitt, 2006 [1922/1934]: 36; emphasis added); in his subsequent correspondence with Ernst Feil, he explained that political theology only appeared after the Reformation and that 'Varro and Augustine [. . .] did not know it' (cited in Meier, 2011: 202n48).

One of the first and most famous deployments of the term after the Reformation is in the title of Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* published anonymously in 1670. However, Spinoza does not define or develop the term 'theological-political' anywhere in the treatise, which seems to simply refer to the relationship between religion and politics, which is the primary subject of the treatise. Yet, the preface contains a brief account of the origin of religion in fear and its role in sustaining unfree (non-democratic) forms of government, which bears some similarity to Augustine's critique of political theology:

It may indeed be the highest secret of monarchical government and utterly essential to it, to keep men deceived, and to disguise the fear that sways them with the specious name of religion, so that they will fight for their servitude as if they were fighting for their own deliverance. (Spinoza, 2007 [1670]: 6, see also 211–12)

But religion was not necessarily limited to such a negative political role: towards the end of the book, he also presented an account of the Israelites' covenant with God (prior to and distinct from their covenant with Moses) after their exodus from Egypt, whereby they regained their natural liberties. While this covenant formally subjected them all to God's absolute authority, the absence of an earthly ruler made them equals 'as in a democracy' (Spinoza, 2007 [1670]: 214, 231–3, 202). However, Spinoza argued that since the collapse of the ancient Hebrew state and this direct covenant with God, there

had been no civil obligation towards God apart from that mediated by the state. Indeed, the central argument of Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* was that the state should enjoy sovereign authority in both political and religious matters over and against ecclesiastical authorities to ensure the common good – and private freedom of conscience (Spinoza, 2007 [1670]: 230, 242–5; see also Nadler, 2011: 230, 202–3). Montserrat Herrero points out that Spinoza's investment of religious authority in the state parallels and could even be read as an attempt to resurrect Roman 'civil theology' against the Church (Herrero, 2017a: 23–4; see also 2016: 31–48).³ However, this sits uneasily with the initial approximation and evaluation of political theology. Thus, the exact meaning of 'political theology' in the title, and its relationship to the classical use of the term, remains ambiguous beyond the obvious reference to the intersection of religion and politics.

Schmitt does not mention Spinoza's treatise anywhere in *Political Theology* despite the obvious conceptual overlap in the titles and his familiarity with Spinoza's *Ethics* (see Schmitt, 2014 [1921/1928]: 123; Spinoza, 2018 [1677]: 28). This is particularly odd since Spinoza's immanent conception of God (Spinoza, 2018 [1677]: 3–42, 158, 163), denial of miracles (Spinoza, 2007 [1670]: 81–96), and democratic republicanism (Spinoza, 2007 [1670]: 200–2, 2002: 700–54) correspond to the modern tendency towards immanence in theology and political thought that Schmitt decries in *Political Theology* (Schmitt, 2006 [1922/1934]: 48–51; see also Israel, 2001). Schmitt would later rectify this omission in his *Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, where he held Spinoza's argument for private freedom of conscience responsible for '[destroying] the mighty leviathan from within and [bringing] about the end of the mortal god' (Schmitt, 1996 [1938]: 57).

A modern and more directly relevant predecessor is Bakunin's use of the term in 'The Political Theology of Mazzini', written in response to the Italian republican Giuseppe Mazzini's attacks on the Paris Commune and the International Workingmen's Association, embracing Mazzini's charges of atheism, socialism and anarchism, while decrying his faithfulness to Christianity and the state (Bakunin, 1973 [1871]: 214–31; Mazzini, 2009: 153–66; see also Ravindranathan, 1981: 484–93; Pernicone, 1993: 35–8).⁴ Bakunin (1973 [1871]) identified religion and the state as interrelated forms of oppression of humankind to be overthrown, insisting that 'divinity, once established on its heavenly throne, has become the scourge of humanity and the ally of every tyrant, charlatan, tormentor and exploiter of the popular masses' (p. 222).⁵ It is possible that Bakunin's use of the term 'political theology' implicitly referred to and turned its Augustinian connotations against Christianity, although this cannot be verified insofar as neither the concept nor its origins are elaborated in the text.⁶

Schmitt framed his argument in *Political Theology* in terms of a fundamental conflict between the forces of order represented by various reactionary Catholic thinkers (e.g. Cortés, 2000; de Maistre, 1965) and atheist anarchism represented by Bakunin, who figures prominently as Schmitt's main political and theoretical adversary (e.g. Schmitt, 2006 [1922/1934]: 50, 55, 64–6; see also Meier, 2006: 79–80; Newman, 2019: 21–3, 29–33; Strauss, 2007 [1932]: 121). While 'The Political Theology of Mazzini' is not explicitly mentioned in *Political Theology*, it is referenced in the conclusion to the contemporary draft of *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, indicating that Schmitt was familiar with it and derived the term from this source (Schmitt, 1996 [1923]: 36, 39;

Ulmen, 1996: xxx in 21). While Schmitt's (2006 [1922/1934]) explicit hostility towards Bakunin may at first appear to preclude this genesis, he insisted on the implicit theoretical continuity between anarchists and reactionaries in a number of passages: both recognize God and the state as transcendent and absolute (sovereign) authorities but draw opposite political conclusions (pp. 55, 67). This theoretical continuity allows them to appropriate theoretical insights from each other without compromising their political position. Schmitt's appropriation of the term political theology from Bakunin can be understood on this model, as being both based on *and* in direct opposition to Bakunin (Meier, 2006: 80–81; Newman, 2019: 21–3, 30–33; Flohr, 2023a: 47–8).

Heinrich Meier has convincingly argued that the starting point of Schmitt's *Political Theology* was a polemical affirmation of Bakunin's interrelated critiques of the authority of God and the state, which allowed him to bypass the Augustinian stigma on political theology and elaborate his own project under this heading (Meier, 2011: 201). However, Bakunin only employed the term 'political theology' once in the title as a pejorative and did not develop it systematically in the text, and Schmitt's development of the concept(s) extends far beyond this starting point and remains fundamentally irreducible to it. As such, Schmitt should be credited as the first to have systematically developed the modern concept of 'political theology' as part of a positive analytical project distinct from theology.⁷

Two Concepts of Political Theology

Although Schmitt's book is entitled *Political Theology*, the concept itself remains remarkably rare throughout the text and is not systematically explored until chapter three, where it is presented in two divergent forms. Schmitt's (2006 [1922/1934]) concept of political theology is initially elaborated via his so-called secularization thesis, which succinctly proposes that '[a]ll significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development [. . .] but also because of their systematic structure' (p. 36). Schmitt posits a historical and a structural relation between the concepts of (Christian) theology and those of the modern theory of the state. The historical relation consists in the transfer and transformation of central concepts from theology to the modern theory of the state: the idea of an 'omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver' and 'the exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology' (Schmitt, 2006 [1922/1934]: 36). The concepts of political thought retained the systematic structure of their theological antecedents insofar as they were organized around and relied on the notion of a single transcendent and absolute authority, i.e. the sovereign state. Schmitt's secularization thesis thus highlights both continuity and change between theology and political theory. The historical migration of concepts from one to the other marked a change of terrain that altered both the referents and their meaning but retained their systematic structure. This double meaning is neatly summarized by the concept of political theology itself, which simultaneously evokes these concepts' historical origins in theology *and* the historical movement beyond it in and as modern formally 'secular' political thought.

While Schmitt invokes 'all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state', his focus is on (state) sovereignty, as illustrated by the book's subtitle ('Four Chapters on the

Concept of Sovereignty') and its contents. At the heart of Schmitt's conception of political theology is the thesis that our understanding of the modern state is the result of a historical process of secularization, whereby the notion of a transcendent and omnipotent God was transferred into early modern political thought and transformed into the idea of the sovereign state, which maintains the conceptual structure of theology independently of its religious content, constituting a distinct political theology that gradually supplanted previous religious legitimations of political authority destabilized by the Reformation. The paradigmatic examples are Bodin's (1992) description of state sovereignty as 'the absolute and perpetual power of a commonwealth' vested in the sovereign who appears as the 'earthly image of God' (pp. 1, 46) and Hobbes' (1994 [1651/1668]) characterization of the sovereign state as a '*Mortal God*' (p. 109). Schmitt (2006 [1922/1934]) outlined how this historical process of secularization produced a 'systematic analogy between theological and juristic concepts', since they both relied on the notion of a single transcendent and absolute power (God and the state), and insists that 'only by being aware of this analogy can we appreciate the manner in which the philosophical ideas of the state developed in the last centuries' (pp. 42, 36).

Schmitt then substitutes his initial account of the systematic analogies between the concepts of theology and political theory occasioned by this historical and conceptual *transfer* for a thesis about the synchronous structural *correspondence* of theological conceptions of God and ideas of the state, which diverges significantly from the former version of the secularization thesis. He summarizes the central tenet of this second thesis: 'the 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, 2006 [1922/1934]: 42, 46). Schmitt outlines how theistic conceptions of God corresponded to absolutism and the 18th-century advent of deistic conceptions of God paralleled the emergence of the modern constitutional state understood as the progressive decline of absolute (sovereign) authority in religion and politics (Schmitt, 2006 [1922/1934]: 46–51; see also Herrero, 2017a: 25–46).

While Schmitt also describes this development in terms of 'secularization' in the 'Introduction' added to the 1934 edition, this historical narrative contradicts his previous formulation of the secularization thesis, which suggested that the theological conception of God was transferred and transformed into the idea of the sovereign state in modern political theory (*qua* political theology), replacing the practical political and ideological functions of religion proper (Schmitt, 2006 [1922/1934]: 2; see also 2007 [1929]).⁸ The initial ('transfer') version of the secularization thesis also suggests (diachronic) parallels between theology and political theory, but they do not amount to anything like the stable synchronous correspondence that Schmitt outlines in the following pages, where changes to one are associated with contemporaneous changes to the other (Schmitt, 2006 [1922/1934]: 42–6). On this basis, it is possible to differentiate two contradictory conceptions of political theology, referring to either a *transfer* of concepts from theology to political theory or their continuous structural *correspondence*.

While it exceeds this article's focus on the concepts of political theology in Schmitt's 1922 book, another variation in *Political Theology II* is worth noting. Here Schmitt affirmed that political theology denoted the study of the systematic structural parallels and the transfer of concepts between theology and political theory: '[t]his is exactly what

is at stake in my *Political Theology*. The scientific conceptual structure of both of these faculties has systematically produced areas in which concepts can be transposed, among which harmonious exchanges are permitted and meaningful' (Schmitt, 2014 [1970]: 109). However, here the historical origins of this structural correspondence (i.e. secularization) remains absent and the transfer of concepts appears to take place in both directions (also anticipated in Schmitt, 1996 [1923]: 18–19). This broadens the scope of political theology significantly, from the study of the early modern transfer of concepts from theology to political theory or their correspondence, to the structural parallels, multidirectional exchanges and relations between these two fields throughout history (e.g. Herrero, 2015: 1166–7; 2017a: 26–9; Kantorowicz, 1997 [1957]: 19; Heron, 2018: 1–5; Agamben, 2017: 365–641), but cannot explain these structural parallels.

The Doctrine of Decisionism

Political Theology is not just an historical account of the theological origins and structure of the modern notion of the sovereign state. Schmitt's main argument in the book is that a sovereign transcending and exercising absolute power in relation to the legal system is the condition of possibility of the state. Schmitt consciously deployed and, arguably, distorted his secularization theses to frame and motivate this prescriptive political doctrine of personalized sovereign decision-making power, which is designated as his 'doctrine of decisionism' (or, simply, 'decisionism') to differentiate it from the two prior concepts of political theology, although Schmitt sought to equate them.

Political Theology begins with his famous definition of the sovereign as 'he who decides on the exception'. Schmitt argues that all legal systems presuppose and depend on an extra-legal sovereign power, whose decision founds and sustains the law (Schmitt, 2006 [1922/1934]: 5). This sovereign power is not exhausted in the constitution of the legal system but remains alongside it and functions as its guarantor. Although this power may be legally codified in emergency clauses, the conditions that occasion it are per definition exceptional and therefore cannot be predefined and depend solely on the sovereign's decision, as do the measures adopted (Schmitt, 2006 [1922/1934]: 5–13).⁹

While Schmitt attempts to couple his decisionism with his initial outline of political theology, it does not correspond to the historical record: although the early modern political thinkers who first developed the doctrine of state sovereignty (*qua* political theology), such as Bodin and Hobbes, supported absolutism, they consistently conceived the state as an impersonal subject transcending both rulers and ruled. Even though they insisted that the sovereignty of the state had to be vested in a sovereign (individual or collective person capable of acting as one), they also insisted that this sovereign's powers were derived from and depended on the state's sovereignty rather than the other way around (see Skinner, 1978: 358, 2002: 368–413; Balibar, 2004: 133–54; *pace* Schmitt, 2006 [1922/1934]: 8–9, 33–4).

However, Schmitt's conception of personalized sovereign power can be aligned with his second conception of political theology as the synchronous structural correspondence between conceptions of God and forms of state. More specifically, it corresponds to the theistic conceptions of God's relationship to his creation: God created the world *ex nihilo* as a systematic and rational whole yet intervenes in it and changes it at will. The

theological parallel to the state of exception is the miracle according to Schmitt, which simultaneously refers to God's creation and his subsequent interventions in and against the order of his creation (Schmitt, 2006 [1922/1934]: 36; see also Elshtain, 2008). Similarly, the personalized sovereign power that Schmitt describes constitutes the legal system *and* intervenes in and against it at will; a relationship that Schmitt explicitly endorsed and argued had to be maintained against its progressive decline (*qua* secularization) in modernity (Schmitt, 2006 [1922/1934]: 65–6, 2; see also Schmitt, 2007 [1929]).

This distinctly normative argument should be understood in its historical context, as Schmitt later insisted 'all political concepts, images and terms have a polemical meaning. They are focused on a specific conflict and are bound to a concrete situation' (Schmitt, 2007 [1932]: 30–1). His doctrine of decisionism pertains to the interpretation of article 48 of the Weimar Constitution, which granted the president the power to suspend civil liberties, deploy the armed forces and rule by decree without prior legislative approval in a state of exception (Kaes et al., 1995 [1919]: 48).¹⁰ The article did not define what constituted such an exception and Schmitt argued that it was up to the president (*qua* sovereign) to decide when the situation constituted an exception and what measures it necessitated. Moreover, he argued that this was not a legal matter as such since the sovereign transcended the law; they were both the origin and continuous condition of possibility of the legal system and thus could not be limited by it (Schmitt, 2006 [1922/1934]: 11–13; but see also 2014 [1921/1928]: 180–226). Schmitt considered this decisionist doctrine central to the survival of the Weimar Republic, which was marred by sustained political instability, economic crises, revolutionary movements and coup attempts.¹¹ Schmitt criticized those (particularly liberals) who insisted on the constitutional and/or parliamentary delimitation of the president's power to declare a state of exception and deploy the full might of the state against such threats, insisting that they failed to grasp the distinctly political (and existential) nature of these crises and conflicts (Schmitt, 2006 [1922/1934]: 11–12, 14, 65).¹²

Schmitt understood the crisis of the Weimar Republic as an existential threat to the political community and argued that it could not be resolved by constitutional procedures or parliamentary negotiation, but required a political response – more specifically, the concentration of the sovereign power to mobilize the unrestrained might of the state against its enemies with a single person, the president. This was itself a political intervention, which paradoxically sought to replace these political conflicts (practically and conceptually) with the sovereign power of the state vested in the president and must, as such, be understood as fundamentally *antipolitical* in both the colloquial and subsequent Schmittian senses of the word. Schmitt's conception of personalized sovereign power is, at its most fundamental level, the fantasy of transcending the social and political conflicts and contradictions – the annulment of the political.¹³

Contradictions of Political Theology

Schmitt's *Political Theology* contains numerous contradictions, the primary being his deployment of three contradictory but terminologically undifferentiated conceptions of political theology. There is also a contradiction between his initial two conceptions of political theology (see section two) and another between Schmitt's descriptive and

prescriptive claims, especially his first ('transfer') and third ('decisionism') conceptions of political theology. The former acknowledges the formal secularization of modern politics and posits a continued structural relationship between theological and political concepts, while the latter aims to reverse this process of secularization, (re-)sacralize modern politics and resurrect absolutism in the modern form of personalized sovereignty (Schmitt, 2006 [1922/1934]: 62, 66).¹⁴

Schmitt's decisionism does not follow from the initial version of the secularization thesis: showing that the emergence and existence of modern states is intimately entwined with the secularization of the idea of transcendent omnipotence and its investment in the modern state is not the same as showing that the continuous condition of possibility of any political entity and legal system is the investment of the sovereign power to suspend the constitution at will and commit the full force of the state to combat its enemies in a single person. Even if these two arguments were identical, and that the early modern thinkers that defined the concept of state sovereignty were in fact concerned with an extra-legal sovereign power vested in a single person and/as the condition of possibility of the state (which is not the case), they still sit somewhat uneasily together. Schmitt's normative claim that the legal system must be subordinated to a personal sovereign power outside and above it would then be based on, and motivated by, the initial version of his descriptive and historical account, which suggests that this political theology has already been established in both political theory and practice, undermining the normative impetus to intervene in order to institute it. As such, there remains a strange circularity between them (Thiem, 2013: 5).¹⁵

Schmitt's doctrine of decisionism is much more easily paired with the second conception of political theology, which posits a synchronic correspondence between notions of transcendent and absolute authority in theology and political theory. Their compatibility is seemingly by design, insofar as the narrative of their parallel decline (*qua* secularization) frames and motivates Schmitt's decisionism. However, the latter does not follow from the former; Schmitt's decisionism is only one of many possible responses (including liberal indifference and anarchist radicalization). This second conception of political theology does not explain why or how this centuries-long trajectory of decline can or should be reversed in and as personalized sovereign power. Moreover, Schmitt does not consider the resurrection of theism that this would imply and thus, seemingly, abandons the underlying notion of political theology altogether. As such, his normative doctrine of decisionism stands alone, independently of the correspondence-conception of political theology.

The contradictions of Schmitt's *Political Theology* are manifold and have multiplied in the subsequent literature, but the disjuncture between Schmitt's descriptive and prescriptive claims indicate that it is possible to extricate the former (in either version) and pursue historical and conceptual research into political theology without inadvertently being caught up in Schmitt's authoritarian politics. As such it is possible to pursue Schmitt's initial transfer-version of the secularization thesis, as an analytical point about the theological origins and conceptual structure of modern political thought and starting point for research into the resulting analogies, relations and transfers between theology and modern political thought. (It is also possible to disband the initial version of the secularization thesis and simply assume their structural parallels, as Schmitt suggests in

Political Theology II.) It is likewise possible to use Schmitt's second conception of political theology as a point of departure for research into the synchronic structural correspondence between the concepts of theology and politics in a given epoch. While Schmitt presents the two initial concepts of political theology and secularization as identical to and continuous with his normative doctrine of decisionism, these three conceptions of political theology both can and should be explicitly differentiated in contemporary research and debates on political theology departing from this classical work.

Schmitt's *Political Theology* provided the first modern definition of the concept of 'political theology' and has thereby become *the* central point of reference within the field of political theology that has developed over the more than hundred years that have passed since it was published. Most scholars working within this field refer to it, directly or indirectly, as the source of their conception of political theology. However, this work contains three divergent and often contradictory conceptions of political theology, and they have persisted in the literature, which variously identifies it with the transfer and transformation of theological concepts into modern political theory (e.g. Agamben, 2017; Assman, 2000: 29–30; 2002; Esposito, 2015a: 4ff, 2015b; Kantorowicz, 1997 [1957]; Peterson, 2011; Taubes, 2013, 2004 [1933]),¹⁶ the synchronic structural correspondence between them (e.g. Blumenberg, 1983 [1966]: 89–102; Elshtain, 2008; Kelsen, 1973 [1922–23]), and/or decisionism (e.g. Agamben, 2017; Benjamin, 1998 [1928]: 63–74; Blumenberg, 1983 [1966]: 89–102; Elshtain, 2008; Kelsen, 1973 [1922–23]: 61–82; Peterson, 2011; Voegelin, 2003: 477–8; see also List, 2021: 11; Gontier 2013: 25–43). This would not be a problem if scholars were aware of these divergences and specified which conception they employed. However, they rarely do. This leads to unnecessary and unproductive misunderstandings that could easily be avoided through greater conceptual precision. The distinction between the three different conceptions of political theology derived from my rereading of Schmitt's *Political Theology* is meant to facilitate the development of precisely such conceptual clarity regarding what is meant by the term.

Conclusion

This article has traced the origins and semantic development of the concept of political theology from Roman Antiquity through the works of St. Augustine, Spinoza and Bakunin up to Schmitt's *Political Theology*. It has argued that this work provides the first modern definition(s) of the concept of political theology as part of a positive analytical and political project, which continues to exercise a defining influence on the literature on political theology today. It showed that it was formulated in implicit dialogue with the preceding tradition and thinkers, especially Bakunin, without therefore being reducible to either. A close reading of *Political Theology* showed that it contained not just one but three divergent conceptions of political theology that continue to characterize and confound contemporary research and debates on political theology. The article has distinguished three different conceptions of political theology and developed an analysis of their complex interrelations, which can be used to orientate and further future research on and debates about political theology within social, cultural and political theory.

The concept of political theology is used to denote (1) the historical *transfer* of concepts from theology in and as early modern political theory, producing lasting structural parallels between them, (2) the spontaneous and continuous synchronic *correspondence* between theological conceptions of God and notions of legitimate political authority, and/or (3) the identification of a personalized sovereign with the authority to declare a state of exception as the condition of possibility of modern legal systems. The interrelations between these three conceptions of political theology are complex: the initial two conceptions of political theology provide descriptive historical accounts of the relationship between the concepts of theology and political theory and thus diverge from decisionism, which is a prescriptive political doctrine. Moreover, the initial two conceptions of political theology contradict one another insofar as the first limits the historical coincidence between theology and political theory to the early modern transfer of concepts and functions from one to the other, whereas the second maintains a continuous structural parallel between them. Additionally, the transfer-conception of political theology does not relate to decisionism in any meaningful way, whereas Schmitt consistently presented the second as being complementary to the last, the correspondence-conception of political theology justifying his decisionism, although one does not follow logically from the other.

These three terminologically coextensive but contradictory conceptions of political theology have spread from Schmitt's initial formulations in *Political Theology* to the subsequent literature on political theology. This has led to widespread conceptual confusion and contradictions within the field, which can be overcome using the proposed conceptual schema to attain a greater awareness of and explicit orientation in relation to these divergences and their interrelations. This would facilitate greater conceptual clarity and thereby contribute to the improvement of historical and theoretical research into either of the three different meanings attributed to the concept of political theology and, simultaneously, facilitate better and more meaningful exchanges between them, as well as within the wider field of political theology in the future.

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Notes

1. Note that the majority of the work on political theology has been written in and about the Western Judeo-Christian tradition. Asad (1993, 2003) has highlighted the distinctly Western Christian origins and configuration of the concepts of religion and secularism, which also informs and structures Schmitt's concepts of political theology and may have shaped the literature. For some valuable contributions that consider political theology beyond these confines, see Ralston (2018), Belkeziz (2009), Bannerjee (2018), Dube (2020), and Kwok Pui-Lan (2016).
2. However, some central political thinkers maintained an interest in Roman 'civil religion' as a model for the use of religious beliefs and practices to create or sustain a state (Machiavelli, 1996 [ca. 1517]: 34–43; Rousseau, 1987 [1762]: 220–7).
3. Herrero (2016) argues that the state's assumption of religious authority constitutes its sacralization (pp. 38–40) and identifies this as the origin of Schmitt's (Herrero, 2017a) concept of political theology (p. 24). However, she does not explain why Spinoza should be considered more relevant than Bakunin, who Schmitt explicitly discussed in the book.
4. The text combines 'Réponse d'un International a Mazzini', translated and published in Italian in *Il Gazzettino Rosa* (Milan) on 16 August (and in the original French in *La Liberté*, two days later), a more systematic critique of Mazzini published in French at the end of the year under the title 'La Théologie Politique de Mazzini et L'Internationale' and some of Bakunin's subsequent revisions (Ravindranathan, 1981: 490–3).
5. Bakunin's argument drew on his unpublished 'Federalism, Socialism and Anti-theologism', written in 1868 and, more significantly, his draft for the second part of his planned *The Knouto-Germanic Empire and The Social Revolution* (the first part of which was published as a pamphlet in 1871) that he worked on in February and March 1871, but which was only posthumously discovered and published by his collaborators Carlo Cafiero and Elisée Reclus under the title *God and the State* in 1882. However, the specific term 'political theology' is absent from both (Avrich, 1970: viii–ix; Bakunin, 1970 [1882], 1971 [1867]).
6. Recent research has recovered previously overlooked critiques of political theology amongst the so-called 'Young Hegelians', a radical intellectual milieu that Bakunin formed part of in the 1840s, suggesting another possible genealogy of his (and, by implication, Schmitt's) use of the term (Flohr, 2021; Newman, 2019: 44–61; see also Del Giudice, 1981; McLaughlin, 2002). Schmitt mentions them but seems unaware of this (Schmitt, 2006 [1922/1934]: 50–1).
7. Consequently, Heinrich Meier's (Straussian) reading of Schmitt's work as a political doctrine shaped by faith in divine revelation will be disregarded (Meier, 2006, 2011; see also Godefroy, 2024; Herrero, 2017a: 24).
8. Schmitt's initial version of the secularization thesis in this regard resembles Max Weber's account of the secularization of Calvinist ethics as the 'spirit' of modern capitalism (Weber, 1992 [1905/1920]: 123–5) rather than his (related) idea of the progressive rationalization and disenchantment [*Entzauberung*] of the modern world, which has much more in common with Schmitt's second account of secularization (Weber, 2004 [1917]: 13, 30). The latter has recently been explored as the basis of an account of *economic theology* (Agamben, 2017: Dean, 2012, 2018: 363–641; Heron, 2018).
9. Note that such measures cannot be legally delimited and may amount to a new constitution, thereby voiding Schmitt's prior distinction between commissarial and sovereign dictatorship (Schmitt, 2006 [1922/1934]: 12–13, 15, 7; 2014 [1921/1928]: 20–33, 112–31; see also Wolin, 1990: 400).
10. The president was directly elected for seven-year terms. In addition to the abovementioned emergency powers, the president could also dismiss parliament and appoint and dismiss the

- chancellor. These extensive powers were meant to ensure political efficacy despite the deep political divisions of the Weimar Republic (Kaes et al. 1995 [1919]: 47–8; Mommsen, 1998: 56–8).
11. The November Revolution that ended Germany's involvement in the First World War was only barely contained by an alliance of the social democratic leadership, the army high command and right-wing militias (the so-called *Freikorps*). A new constitution was signed by the social democratic president Friedrich Ebert in August 1919, but political and economic crises continued to destabilize the Weimar Republic (see Broué, 2004; Mommsen, 1998).
 12. In 1933 the German president Paul von Hindenburg invoked article 48 in the 'Reichstag Fire Decree' which, alongside the 'Enabling Law', established the legal foundation of the National Socialist regime (Rabinbach and Gilman, 2013: 47–8, 52–3). Although they were formally only temporary emergency measures, Schmitt conceptualized this as the complete supersession of the Weimar constitution and the founding of a new legal order in *State, Movement, People*, published later that year, undermining his previous distinction between commissarial and sovereign dictatorship that has been used to defend him (see, for instance, Schwab, 2006: xviii–xx; Schmitt, 2001 [1933]: 3–11; *pace* Wolin, 1990: 409, 397, 400; Neocleous, 1996: 13–23; Agamben, 2017: 207). For analyses of subsequent states of exception see also Armitage (2002), Adey et al. (2015), and Castrillón and Marchevsky (2021).
 13. Schmitt would undoubtedly have disagreed. However, his subsequent *The Concept of the Political* (1932) sought to establish the unity of the national community as the (strangely apolitical) 'political' foundation of all politics, which was thereby displaced to the external and formally hostile relations between states, rendering international relations the only positive political form. According to Schmitt, domestic political conflicts could only be considered truly political to the extent that they threatened to undermine the unity of the state in and as civil war, which he described as the 'self-laceration' of the political community, revealing the unity of the state as both the fundamental presupposition and normative aim of his thought (Schmitt, 2007 [1932]: 26, 32, 35, 38–42; see also Teschke, 2011: 213–14). Assuming the continuity and coherence of Schmitt's position over time, it would be possible to reread Schmitt's argument in *Political Theology* as an attempt to grasp and mobilize the sovereign power of the state to protect the unity of the political community against the threat of civil war; a position furthered in Schmitt's subsequent *State, Movement, People*, where he insisted that the 'one-party State of the National-Socialist Germany' had resolved 'the danger of [. . .] a pluralistic division of Germany' (Schmitt, 2001 [1933]: 11; see also Flohr, 2023b: 177–8).
 14. Note that Schmitt also sought to support his decisionist doctrine with a formally democratic foundation modelled on Hobbes' *Leviathan*, emphasizing that the political unity of the people was a function of its representation by the person of the sovereign *contra* liberal parliamentarism (Schmitt, 2000 [1923/1926], 14–17, 31–2, 34; 2008 [1928]: 239–49; 2015: 140–6, 150–160; Hobbes, 1994 [1651/1668]: 104–5; see also Neocleous, 1996: 8–9, 16; Rubinelli, 2020: 114–35; Vatter, 2021: 21–65).
 15. However, it is possible to explain Schmitt's coupling of 'transfer' and 'decisionism' if we assume that he took the former (in a personalized form) to outline both the origin and necessary structure of modern legal and political systems, which had not been grasped and might therefore inadvertently be undone. This would explain the need for both the descriptive and prescriptive account. It does not mean that one follows from the other, only that they might be combined without immediate contradiction.
 16. Note that the three latter also consider conceptual transfers in the opposite direction.

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