


# Weighing Schmitt's political theology anew: Implicit religion in politics

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Carl Schmitt, in a sense the initiator of Political Theology, proposed that all important political concepts are reinterpretations of or parallels to theological concepts. This insight is in this contribution described and applied to current political thought, for which it is valuable as modern democracies emerge from the secularism of modernism to a more fully self-aware post-secularism.

**Keywords:** politics; theology; Carl Schmitt; post-secularism; metaphysics and society; implicit religion; faith and democracy.

## Schmitt, introduced and traduced

Carl Schmitt (1888–1985) was a German legal scholar, although with great interest in politics and some interests in religion (he describes himself as a lay theologian) and literature. (On him, biographically, see, for example, Mehring 2014a and Balakrishnan 2000.) Central to his thinking on law and democracy was authority-justification and legitimacy in exercising power, with a democratic orientation in general, but with a focus on the state of exception and hence on the role of a strong political leader and state. The latter later proved useful for the then-emerging *Dritte Reich* thinking, in which political order his career therefore met with quick but limited success; it is enough, however, to have him seriously investigated during the *Nuremberg* trials processes. His political influence currently remains limited to contexts in which a strong leadership with a strong state are promoted (a resurgence of which we are seeing in various parts of the world at present – cf. De Benoist 2013; surprisingly, this applies as much to the right as to the left of the political spectrum – cf. Specter 2014) and where the freedom of the individual and other classically liberal stances are not of central worth (cf. Lind 2015). Schmitt's academic influences run more widely and will be traced in the follow-up article mentioned in footnote 1 and under point 4 below.

The first works important here on Schmitt's understanding of the role of religion in political systems are the last two essays collected in his 1922 volume, *Politische Theologie* and *Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität*. In this publication, he sets out influentially earlier ideas, for which he would after this 1922 volume become famous; this is different to many of his other ideas, which were in time to render him infamous. The main target in *Politische Theologie* (an expression which he most influentially popularises, and uses with imprecision – cf. Vatter 2014, yet which may be cast as central to his thought – cf. Motschenbacher 2000:11–23) was a perceived superficiality in society, particularly on theological or metaphysical dimensions to important political and other constructs not being recognised for the continued influence they had in the then-contemporary society.

Schmitt in *Politische Theologie II* (1970), the second work important here on Schmitt's understanding of the role of religion in political systems, takes as most important discussion points the 1935 book by Peterson, *Monotheismus als politisches Problem* (a topic which is still current; cf., e.g., Assmann 2003 and Schindler 1978). This reaction of Schmitt to Peterson was overtly because of Peterson's negative interpretation in 1935 of Schmitt's 1922 work (which would ruin their friendship). Surprisingly in legal-political discourse for our times, Schmitt draws heavily on analyses of important moments in earlier church history, namely, of Augustine of Hippo, Eusebius of Caesarea and the Council of Nicea in 325 AD (at which the orthodox position on the nature of the Trinity was decided; cf., e.g., Ayres 2006). As a broad thrust of argument, here too, Schmitt (1970) reacted against society being superficial, namely, through the denial of metaphysics and its impact in society. By means of nuanced, very finely formulated writing, he settles a number of personal scores, while in effect recuperating his 1922 published ideas (refined in some of his other

**Note:** This contribution is an extended version of a paper presented at the 'Pious radicals? Strong religion and politics in modern Europe' conference, Universität Siegen, Germany, 14–15 March 2019. It is the first article of two, with the latter, co-authored with K Vanhoutte, which will indicate the recent reception of Schmitt's idea on the linkage between religion and politics.

The collection entitled 'Eben Scheffler Festschrift', sub-edited by Jurie H. le Roux (University of Pretoria) and Christo Lombaard (University of South Africa).

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publications during the intervening years). Such recuperation can also be seen as an attempt at the public rehabilitation of these ideas of his. Schmitt's personal and professional reputation had namely suffered heavily because of his political involvement during the early stages of World War II, but his sense of again making an intellectual contribution to a world growing in superficiality is clear.

Superficial, Schmitt himself is not. Deeply read not only as famous classic but also by some now as obscure texts from antiquity, what he renders is certainly erudite, through the ages and till his own time. The central texts that interest us here, published 48 years apart, stretch over one of the most significant half centuries not only in modern history but also certainly in world history. The intervening years saw World War II and then some decades of the 20th century, which brought huge programmes of democratic politics, technological leaps and other advances. Yet, because the second of these two publications in some ways tries to recapture the strengths of the first, they are not worlds apart: there remains a coherence between the two. *Politische Theologie II* (1970) takes umbrage (which is not too strong a term, given its emotive undertones) at what had been done with *Politische Theologie* (1922), reconstituting its thoughts in the light of critiques, and expanding them in the light of subsequent discussions. Not that *Politische Theologie* was a passionless work: it avidly took to task what was for Schmitt a shallowness in the spirit of its time, namely, that it lacked metaphysical depth. The latter, not only because of Schmitt's own religious convictions (a distanced Catholic, on which cf. Mehring 2014b) but also because of (what may be termed) his sense of the sublime: the material of human existence, namely, always has an implied counterpart in the supra-human. This (anti-modernist) awareness, at least as far as his broad political-existential framework is concerned, is our interest here.

This framework only will in what follows be expanded upon further, indicating some aspects of the continued value of that particular line of thought, while omitting the other aspects of Schmitt's *oeuvre*. The relevance of Schmitt's (anti-modernist) awareness for the present will be indicated by placing it within the currently dawning post-secular sensibilities, related most directly to the concept of *implicit religion* as coined by Edward Bailey. This, I would suggest, *en route* to citizens within liberal democracies living with a more authentic, realistic sense of the self.

## 1922: Metaphysical and theological parallels inherent to the political organisation of societies

In an overview, for Schmitt, '... the metaphysical discourse ... determines the possibility for the conditions of the ideological acceptance of a particular form of political organisation, e.g. parliamentary democracy, absolute monarchy, commissary dictatorship and so on' (Hoelzl & Ward 2008:6; 'metaphysical' here is a better term than De Wilde's 2008:10 too limiting term, 'god', to describe the theological resonance

intended by Schmitt). Schmitt therefore holds that a kind of existential echo chamber exists within societies, in which what is tacitly assumed about the above-human offers some kind of naturally seeming legitimation, even a mirror of sorts, for the political possibilities within societies.<sup>1</sup> He namely opens his 1922 essay, titled simply *Politische Theologie* (the third writing collected in the volume of the same name, on pp. 49–66), with a line that was to attract much attention: '*Alle prägnanten Begriffe der modernen Staatslehre sind säkularisierte theologische Begriffe*' (Schmitt 1922:49). Schmitt goes on to employ in this essay some of his earlier writings, as well as a host of accompanying sources, drawing them together in, now, a systematic presentation.

In what follows, just the here-relevant kernels of ideas are extracted and summarised from *Politische Theologie* (1922:49–84), leaving aside some lengthier elucidating argumentation Schmitt at times offers; he is unfortunately not given to providing many concrete examples, which would have been helpful as concretising illustrations (so too Blumenberg 1974:106). Note, in each instance summarised below, how Schmitt places, although certainly not always equally convincingly so, in parallel a modern political and a religious concept, implying thereby sociologically embedded derivation of the former in the latter:

- The state of exception in a legal system parallels the miracle in theology: the normal state of affairs is, namely, broken through, which constitutes a phenomenological parallel, and which would, moreover, in both cases, be argued against by rationalists.
- Both philosophy of law and theology assume an elevated idea that finds reflection in writing (a constitution compared to the Decalogue).
- In providing for people, by both state and God, a *deus ex machina* kind of protection and support of, respectively, citizens or creatures is found, which is also a phenomenological parallel, with 'omnipotence' in both instances being an applicable term.
- As some practitioners of law question the legitimacy of the state, some thinkers on life question the existence of God.
- In theories of an elevated, powerful state, citizens find themselves in a state of mystical enthrallment or even in union with the state – which parallels the more spiritual orientations to the Divine.
- The incorporated state presents itself as many faces to the citizenry, thus providing an opposite folio, although even more complex, to the Trinity in Christian theology.
- When setting up criteria for capacity before the law, this echoes God as absolute ground for the being of a person.
- The relation between state and law has, as a metaphysical counterleaf, natural law and normative religious legislation.
- The objective nature of law, which allows for no exception and thus eliminates arbitrariness, is held to by both state and religion

1. This is as much the case with economic theories too, which often hold to a certain view of humanity, derived from a set of practical and philosophical considerations, from which is then deduced how humans will, or ought to, behave economically within society: rationally, self-interestedly or idealistically, for instance.

- Marxist-materialist interpretations of history can fall into irrationalism when attributing everything to a single causal factor, as could religion.
- Spiritual explanations of material events and materialist explanations of matters of faith both reduce the other to a caricature.
- In Rousseau's 17th century understanding of government, the place of the head of state parallels that of God over the world, as sole ruler or Ruler.
- In deistic thinking, both the machines of state and of creation run on their own accord, with the sovereign or Sovereign as a benevolent will behind it.
- The organic unity of the nation does not fit with any deistic conception, which is too vague and distanced, but the American-style democratic system fits well with a God who is thoroughly involved in creation.
- A transcendent head of state mirrors a transcendent God.
- Both state and religion are inherently related to humanity's fears.
- Democracy as the end of royalism had no legacy of legitimacy to draw on directly and, therefore, leads to dictatorship where by implication the ruler is the Ruler.

To our eyes, almost a century after this analysis was published, some of the suggestions seem naïve, some possible and hence salvageable, some quite up to date and pertinent to current assumptions. Such an inconsistency is fitting, although these correspondences or implied influences indicated by Schmitt were meant to be understood as referring both to historical 'inspiration', as it were, and to the systemic construction of society (as Schmitt 1922:49 had indicated). He comprehends the two 'sides' as parallels – as analogies between theology and system of state, rather than forms of mystic infusion (from 'above', by divine dictate) or idealised abstraction (from 'below', by human deduction); he namely understands these descriptions of his as sociological in nature (Schmitt 1922:57–60). For various reasons, many thinkers in his time had taken up the anti-religious cause, as Schmitt (1922:64) states, thus causing the nightfall of the transcendental. Theories of immanence could however still relate to an involved God, Schmitt posits, but amongst radicals humanity is elevated to that role.

## 1970: Debating and defending the parallels

The historically wide-ranging grasp in the 1970 volume does more than interpret 'Begriffe der modernen Staatslehre' (as Schmitt 1922:49 had set his intention with the earlier volume), namely, by referring to many periods of time. In discussing opponents and supporters and in expressing his own views, further references when compared to the earlier volume are found here. These elaborations are intended to address directly the problems Schmitt had identified with the reception of, and reactions to, his 1922 work, which responses he describes three times (apart from continuous, less structured references) throughout the book, the most succinct of which is

where he summarises, in a critical tone, the implications of those critiques (Schmitt 1970:74):<sup>2</sup>

1. *Die Lehre von der göttlichen Monarchie mußte an trinitarischen Dogma und die Interpretation der Pax Augusta an der christlichen Eschatologie scheitern.*

2. *Damit ist nicht nur theologisch der Monotheismus als politisches Problem erledigt und der christliche Glaube aus der Verkettung mit dem Imperium Romanum befreit worden, sondern auch grundsätzlich der Bruch mit jeder 'politischen Theologie' vollzogen, die christliche Verkündigung zur Rechtfertigung einer politischen Situation mißbraucht.*

3. *Nur auf dem Boden des Judentums oder Heidentums kann es so etwas wie eine 'politische Theologie' geben.*

Schmitt holds his views over against these three points. Sociologically speaking (cf. also Schmitt 1970:36–39), political theology as an inherently Christian enterprise cannot be declared dead.

The latter is a point which, since the Liberation Theologies of the 1960s onwards (cf. e.g. Cooper 2013), and the other genitive theologies since then, requires no argument. In fact, the power has shifted so much within theological discourse in Westernised countries and liberal democracies that trying to declare political theology in some manner defunct would render the proposer fully controversial. Schmitt however reacts to the opposite situation: where politics had been emptied of its religious sources or content orientation; hence, the exercise of political theology within Christian contexts seemed dubious. These were namely part of the fruits of modernism-secularism (in which context Schmitt 2014 places Schmitt too; cf. Motschenbacher 2000:29–46, 65–67 and also Balke 2015).

In trying to salvage this situation, Schmitt includes also various references to the political-theological mirroring in others' works, although not always equally positively so. Still, he has the intent to make clear that others throughout the centuries – '*wieviel Reflexion und Gedankenarbeit in einer brauchbaren politisch-theologischen oder politisch-metaphysischen Formulierung investiert sein kann*' (Schmitt 1970:43) – have also seen this link (Schmitt 1970:13–98, from which different sections are immediately below conflated for the sake of ease of understanding):

- There is no such thing as neutrality in politics or theology – whoever declares neutrality simply acknowledges that they are in power, and hence represent orthodoxy, with the alternatives then by direct implication being rendered the heterodox or heretic positions.

2. This summary by Schmitt of the critiques against which he reacts may be translated as: (1) Christian eschatology wrecks the doctrine of divine monarchy and the interpretation of the (eternal or holy) Roman empire. (2) In this manner, monotheism as a political question is theologically emptied, and the chains of the Christian faith to the Roman empire had broken, and also the foundational break with all forms of 'political theology' with which the Christian message has been misused to justify a political state of affairs, has been completed. (3) Only within Judaism or paganism can there (therefore) be something such as 'political theology'.

- Humanity understands itself and its socio-political relations through imagery such as metaphors and reflections: *'Der König kann als ein Gott und Gott al ein König erscheinen'* (Schmitt 1970:33).
- An instance of attempted political theology around 325 AD involving Augustine of Hippo and Eusebius of Caesarea and the Council of Nicea can at most be used as an example (as some of Schmitt's opponents had indeed done), but cannot (as some of Schmitt's opponents had then also done) prove that political theology itself had failed.
- Political pluralism amongst the nations and their polytheism replicate one another.
- Parliamentary monarchy cannot find the same legitimation as absolute monarchies, because voting is oriented towards the will of the people rather than towards, in the first instance, the grace of God.
- Authority is different from power, reflecting the relationship of *auctoritas* to *potestas*, or legitimacy to influence, or legality to justification, or at some distance the worldly and the spiritual.
- Jesus as *'Gott-Mensch'* opens the door to political theology, as both the theological and the political are fully and equally present in that two-in-one understanding of Christ, and to deny this would open the door, by inference, to political despotism.
- Keeping theology and politics apart would hence constitute *'abstrakt absoluten Disjunktion'*.
- Max Weber is correct in his view that no body of religious law had made a greater contribution to human rationality than that of the Roman Catholic Church.
- Detheologising means depoliticising, because the world would cease being *'politomorphic'* (a term which is difficult to translate, with *'diversely politic(al)'* an awkward attempt).
- The 16th and 17th centuries Protestant Reformation and the politics of that time suggest one another.

It is clear from the above that the 1970 and 1922 works by Schmitt discussed here are neither unrelated to one another nor entirely synonymous. The later work is conceptually more expansive, drawing as it does on the more directly indicated parallels between politics and religion in the 1922 work. The underlying essence is however the same: politics in some ways draws on religion; religion in some ways enables certain political coherencies. Even if the sparring partners of Schmitt had changed, his sense of indicating metaphysical depth to political sensibilities remains.

## In continuation

Apart from populist political reception in recent years, Schmitt remains surprisingly influential not only in current Philosophy but also at times in Theology; these applications and interpretations will be traced and cast in our own interpretative framework in a contribution to follow on this one, co-authored with the Basel-based philosopher Kristof

Vanhoutte<sup>3</sup>. For the moment, although, I would like to relate Schmitt's ideas outlined above in the language of post-secularism, employing the notion of implicit religion.

Moving beyond the particular debates that Schmitt had been involved with, and past his examples which do not all speak equally well into our time with our reflexive assumptions, the foundational insight that he had been advancing on religion and state seems valuable. Namely, that in whichever way a society regards metaphysics, that implicit undergirding is paralleled in the political arrangements assumed, reflexively, to be legitimate.

Post-secular thought (with some of its foundational literature, including Habermas 2008:17–29; Nynäs, Lassander & Utraiainen 2012; Possemai 2017) is namely based on the demise (still at times questioned) of the secularist assumptions of modernism (borne from especially Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, Weber, Durkheim and Freud), that religion would fully disappear from the active landscape of modern democracies in all but a historical sense. In a broader society (cf. e.g. Berger 2014), reflected in different academic disciplines (cf. e.g. Lombaard 2014:1–6) and more tellingly in demographic projections (Pew Research Center 2017), religiosity maintains influence and relevance in our time, albeit often unacknowledged (at times surprisingly stubbornly so – cf. Hill 2017) and certainly in different ways than in the earlier phases of socio-religious history. These trends towards both greater religiosity and more public expressions of religiosity are set to increase. Rather than be caught unawares again, it is for the sake of academic honesty and political integrity best to acknowledge these formative impulses in society, to track and perhaps try to steer them along healthy democratic pathways. The influences of religion in politics are clear to see; to turn a blind eye to them does not mean that these influences then disappear.

An instance, in some senses extreme but precisely therefore valuable to indicate what we ought to see, can be taken from the famous prohibition of wearing the Muslim veil in French public life, because of the reflexively understood nature of this headscarf as an expression of religiosity. Within the French understanding of *laïcité* as a political orientation, springing from the (foundational for all modern democracies) French revolution, public life should be free from religion. This should be both reflected within and enforced by the apparatus of the French government. In this orientation, the state is understood to have no religious valence, with this as a basic expression of liberal (i.e. non-restrictive, to the fullest possible extent) democracy. However, the foundational question has to be asked: Is the state indeed religiously neutral in enforcing this public banning of the Islamic *hijab*? The state namely adheres ideologically to an atheist (or perhaps agnostic) view of religion, and channels this central view through its political and legal functional mechanisms. (Schmitt's insights summarised above already have

<sup>3</sup>Inited Professor of Philosophy at the Pontifical University Antonianum, Rome; invited Faculty at the Paris Institute for Critical Thinking; Research Fellow at the International Studies Group, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa.

resonance here ... ) However, on two counts, this self-understanding is fallacious:

1. An atheist (or perhaps agnostic) view of religion is not a zero position on matters related to religiosity, but is in fact a stance taken on religion. There is a decided value, fully at play, in this position, and this decided value is namely previously decided. An atheist's (or perhaps agnostic) political stance on religion is namely not a non-stance; it is an activated decision being seen through to its fullest consequences. This decision prefers one form of religiosity – the atheist (or perhaps agnostic) view of religion – over all others. That is a position *on* faith and a position *of* faith. It is a chosen religious orientation: a non-religious orientation is not a religious non-orientation, in which the state would take no position on matters religious, but a stance *on* religion as much as a stance *of* religion.
2. Banning the *hijab* is therefore not a contestation of religion versus non-religion (as the *laïcité* ideology would have it), but is the placement over against one another of two confessions; that is, two positions of faith.

The post-secularist view thus unmasks the false objectivity (in the sense of value-freeness), which a position such as that of *laïcité* would claim for itself. *Laïcité*, practised in this way, rather, is one (subjective) position *on* and *of* religion, taken from amongst a whole range of available others, to which preference is then given. *Laïcité*, practised in this way, is a political act of faith – *vide* Schmitt.<sup>4</sup> It is a concrete religious orientation – the unmasking effect of the post-secularist perspective. There is even in this position, which understands and sells itself as inherently non- or a-religious, abundant 'implicit religion' – a modern Freudian-like concept from Bailey (2002; cf. Lombaard 2016:257–272), which indicates the unrecognised, at times surprising presence of religion, in various ways (confessional as much as unconfessional) in places where modern(ist) humanity does not recognise it. As De Groot (2012) describes this concept:

What holds the 'Implicit Religion' project together is the encouragement to look for religion where one would not expect it. A variety of social phenomena cannot be understood properly without considering those aspects which are usually subsumed under the heading of 'religion'. What advances the study of Implicit Religion is their uncovering, thereby promoting interaction between sociology of religion and other sub-disciplines. What might hamper the study of Implicit Religion is an on-going discussion of the definition of Implicit Religion as if it were a phenomenon itself. Although this is certainly a way to claim a unique field of expertise, it would be contrary to our mission: to highlight parallels, connections, and shifting distinctions, between the religious and the secular ... and to show how religious experience, beliefs, ritual and ethics appear, decontextualized, in other fields. (p. 458)

Could it be that what Bailey had been doing in the United Kingdom recently in this respect was a parallel to what

<sup>4</sup> The reference here is only to the insight from Schmitt that politics echo religion, as described above. To be clear, here, the intention is not to plead for an authoritarian kind of state as Schmitt would have it (cf. Utz 1999:398–415). The sphere in which I write here remains firmly that of a liberal democratic state, but drawing on this particular insight of Schmitt in order to extend precisely such liberal democratic politics, for the sake of greater freedom, which includes also religious freedom.

Schmitt had attempted some decades earlier in Germany: to see religion where it is but where it is often not seen? As stated earlier, Schmitt's 'foundational insight [*seems valid*] ... that in whichever way a society regards metaphysics, that implicit undergirding is paralleled in the political arrangements assumed, reflexively, to be legitimate'.

Recognising this in our present political climate would lead to a greater form of authentic living, if we as a society would acknowledge more fully who we are – not only who we superficially present ourselves as being but also how we are foundationally constituted, or more passively formulated: how through socio-political-religio-economic forces of our times we have been construed. What Comte had done for social structures, Marx for economic structures and Freud for the structures of the human mind, Schmitt (albeit on a much more modest scale than these three formative minds of the modern era) does on religiosity: he asks for the candid appreciation of what has for long remained broadly unrecognised, that this aspect of our humanity too is acknowledged as an inescapable, core driving force.

This insight, or acknowledgement, is not unique in the sense that it would be a new-found truth; rather – in the post-secular moment – it emerges from a historically intercepted awareness of the political self. It is as a part of this emerging cultural 'project', that this aspect of Schmitt's thoughts provide for a valuable stimulus.

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The authors have declared that no competing interest exist.

## Author(s) contributions

I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

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Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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