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GOD'S ANTI-LIBERAL AVANT-GARDE: NEW THEOLOGIES IN THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC

Friedrich Wilhelm Graf

I. Theologians, or: Intellectuals with Extraordinary Mandates

In his sociology of elites Pierre Bourdieu characterized modern intellectuals as 'specialists in dealing with symbolic material'.¹ To this extent, academic theologians can be described as experts in the cognitive, rational care and accumulation of religious symbolic capital. In the text-working knowledge industry, they are responsible for texts of a special type: for Holy scriptures, religious communities' declarations of belief, subjective confessions of pious virtuosi. Theologians conduct the transgenerational 'eternal' conversation about the interpretation of age-old myths and claim the authority to interpret the knowledge of salvation. Fundamental oppositions play an essential role in Jewish and Christian symbolic terminology, for instance, between creator and creature, heaven and earth, this world and the next, salvation and destruction, righteousness and sin. Bearing such elemental differences in mind, religious symbolic terminology can be reconstructed as 'imagined systems'² in which the normative bases of politics or culture are fixed. Since the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and the New Testament 'God's law' promulgate God's instructions and commandments, theologians often

This article is based on a Seminar held at the German Historical Institute London on 2 Feb. 2010. Trans. Jane Rafferty, GHIL.

¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *La noblesse d'état: Grandes écoles et esprit de corps* (Paris, 1989).

² Cf. Emerich Francis, *Wissenschaftliche Grundlagen soziologischen Denkens* (Munich, 1957); along the same lines M. Rainer Lepsius, *Interessen, Ideen und Institutionen* (Opladen, 1990), 232 ff.

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claim a specific ability to distinguish between good and evil.³ European theological histories since the eighteenth century have been shaped by numerous theological intellectuals who cultivate an exceptionally elitist image of their role. From the notion that religion forms 'the substance of culture', a formulation by Paul Tillich hotly discussed in the 1920s,⁴ they derive the claim that given the manifold differentiations in the modern world of knowledge dominated by the expanding cult of specialization, their discipline should remain the 'leading discipline'. Theologians' recourse to religious symbolic terminology puts them in a potentially dangerous position because they do not see themselves as specialists in the special, the particular, but as experts in the unparalleled whole, in God. They often think they know more, can see further, and decide more clearly than other cultural interpreters in the universities. They not infrequently tend to identify their own point of view with omniscience specific to God. Anyone who constructs the absolute sometimes threatens to confuse himself with what has been constructed.

In the early Weimar Republic this tendency towards a totalizing interpretative manner, to 'absolutism', was hotly disputed by theologians, for young, expressionistic interpreters of God with revolutionary ideas and highly aggressive rhetoric now migrated into the 'discursive field' of German-language academic theology. They radically called into question the older theology, both the liberal theology of Adolf von Harnack and Ernst Troeltsch, for example, and the 'positive' conservative theology of thinkers such as Reinhold Seeberg and Martin Kähler, as well as the traditional methodological canon, for instance, the historical-critical standards of meticulous textual interpretation. These young men defined themselves through an emotional fundamental criticism of the bourgeois nineteenth century, sent their academic fathers to the guillotine of rapid oblivion with Jacobin brutality, and adopted the elite manner of an avant-garde with absolute knowledge of God to the point of self-stylization.

³ Cf. Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, art. 'Gesetz: VI. Neuzeit', in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* (Berlin, 1984), xiii. 90–126.

⁴ Regarding Tillich's intellectual worlds, see Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, ' "Old harmony"? Über einige Kontinuitätselemente in "Paulus" Tillichs Theologie der "Allversöhnung" ', in Hartmut Lehmann and Otto Gerhard Oexle (eds.), *Nationalsozialismus in den Kulturwissenschaften* (Göttingen, 2004), ii. 375–415.

New Theologies in the Weimar Republic

When the older theologians accused them of being intolerant 'absolutists', they did not react defensively by withdrawing, but with fiery absolutist emotionalism. In terms of historicism and its crisis, their much-varied argument was that consistent historicization means relativization, in other words, validates comparison, the dissolution of substance into mere relations and functions, unlimited, unrestrainable fragmentation, and indeed – Dilthey and Troeltsch would have admitted this themselves – anarchy of thought and the erosion of all basic commitments. Through the process of historical-critical research, they maintained, 'holy texts' had been philologically frayed and distorted to the point of incomprehensibility. Everything preserved or passed on at any time, by anybody, in any way, in other words, the conventional European cultural rubbish, now seemed relative in historical terms and all equally valid, so that there was no longer any underlying certainty, but only the anomic pluralistic worlds of Musil's 'man without qualities' who tries, unsuccessfully, to disguise his lack of characteristics by donning, at random, costumes from the prop cupboard of 'history'. Historically created relativism could, they said, be overcome only by those with the courage to embrace absoluteness, intellectuals who, with Friedrich Nietzsche recognize the disadvantage of history for life, with Franz Overbeck the scepticist repercussions of basing religious belief in history, and are prepared to learn from Kierkegaard the crucial technique of de-historicizing, the bold leap of faith.

II. *God's Frontgeneration, or: The Holy Alliance of Generational Brothers*

The young German-speaking theologians of the early 1920s exhibited very strong generational solidarity crossing confessional boundaries, and a binding, elemental awareness of crisis. Detlev J. K. Peukert's concept of the *Frontgeneration*⁵ also applies very well to the theological discourse. From the wealth of evidence for the highly emotionally charged selection processes of this intellectual brotherhood, I shall provide just one example. In July 1920, when Franz Rosenzweig first received texts by Paul Tillich about his cousins

⁵ Detlev J. K. Peukert, *Die Weimarer Republik: Krisenjahre der Klassischen Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main, 1987), 26.

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Hans and Rudolf Ehrenberg, who had converted from Judaism to Protestantism for reasons of belief, he wrote enthusiastically to his mistress Margrit Rosenstock-Huessy: 'In Berlin there is a *Privatdozent* Tillich. Theologian. Man of the future. One of our generation. . . . He put forward the same as I did in *Stern* . . . Swims in terminology, but can still walk on the dry land of real language. He's the right sort.'⁶ And a few days later he added: 'I don't know anyone else who could understand what I want.'⁷

So, apart from Rosenzweig, Friedrich Meinecke's Jewish pupil from Freiburg, Tillich, the Protestant armchair socialist striving for ambivalence, and the Ehrenbergs, who else belonged to the theological Front generation? First of all, the known suspects: the Protestant theologians Paul Althaus, Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Werner Elert, Friedrich Gogarten, Rudolf Bultmann, and Emanuel Hirsch. Of the Catholics, amongst others, Romano Guardini, Peter Wust, Odo Casel, and the influential Munich Jesuit Erich Przywara. In the second row, but most definitely present as networkers, the most prominent were the religious intellectual Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, who converted from Judaism to Protestantism and was a difficult friend of Rosenzweig's, the Catholic publicist Ernst Michel, Barth's friend Eduard Thurneysen, and Karl Ludwig Schmidt, the power-conscious publisher of the *Theologische Blätter*. I shall briefly mention this generation's dates of birth: Hans Ehrenberg was born in 1883; Peter Wust and Rudolf Bultmann in 1884; Werner Elert, Hefele, and Guardini in 1885; then in 1886 Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Franz Rosenzweig, Odo Casel, and the Catholic theologian Karl Eschweiler; in 1887 Friedrich Gogarten and Tillich's close friend Carl Mennicke. In 1888 Paul Althaus, Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, Eduard Thurneysen, and Emanuel Hirsch first glimpsed the light of the historical world of the Kaiserreich, perceived by them as depressingly dark. They were followed in 1889 by Ernst Michel and Erich Przywara; in 1890 by Karl Barth's brother Heinrich Barth, a philosopher, as well as the Protestant New

⁶ Franz Rosenzweig, *Die 'Gritli'-Briefe: Briefe an Margrit Rosenstock-Huessy*, ed. Inken Rühle and Reinhold Mayer (Tübingen, 2002), 622 ff. (20 July 1920); see also Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, review of Rosenzweig, 'Gritli'-Briefe and of Michael Gormann-Thelen (ed.), *Franz Rosenzweig – Margrit Rosenstock: Vollständiger Briefwechsel* (Hanover, 2002), published in *Zeitschrift für Neuere Theologiegeschichte/Journal for the History of Modern Theology*, 10 (2003), 147–58.

⁷ Rosenzweig, 'Gritli'-Briefe, 26 July 1920.

Testament theologian Erik Peterson, who converted to the Roman Catholic faith in 1930; and finally in 1891 Karl Ludwig Schmidt and Otto Piper, from 1920 Barth's successor to the chair of *Systematik* at the University of Münster. Some of them maintained close contacts with Viktor von Weizsäcker, born 1886, a medical man deeply engaged in religious matters, and most of them were read very meticulously by Carl Schmitt, born in 1888.

Without any generational essentialism and without describing in any more detail their respective experiences of socialization and ruptures in their life histories, I should stress that historians of modern theology – like all other intellectual historians – do not have at their disposal any viable theory for describing possible connections between biography and knowledge production, in this case theological programme and writings. Generally speaking the ideological worlds, conceptual constructs, and methodological standards of theology are far too complex to be 'traced back' to immediately apparent biographical 'influences', in a sort of psychologizing or sociologizing perspective. Nonetheless, in the case of the theological Front generation, it can cautiously be asserted that anyone born between 1885 and 1890 in Germany was between 25 and 30 years old in 1914 and thus an ideal candidate for war. If he survived, he experienced the end of the war and the Versailles Treaty, now five traumatizing years older. He could be called to a university chair in the late years of the Weimar Republic, in his early to mid-forties, and was now in a position to make academic or church policy in grand style.

Regardless of all political, religious, and theological differences, the leading lights of this generation shared two striking assumptions. They regarded historicism as the representative discourse for the crisis of modernity per se, so that an elemental suffering from quite diverse phenomena and repercussions of modern pluralism, perceived as relativism and a threat to identity, became more intense in the thematic complex 'crisis of historicism'. Their writings, and those of the three Swiss Dialectic Theologians Karl Barth, Eduard Thurneysen, and Emil Brunner, were marked by crisis rhetoric, and it is no coincidence that the Dialectic Theology of Barth, Brunner, and Bultmann has been known in the English-speaking world since the mid-1920s as Theology of Crisis. The feeling of degeneration, decline, collapse, crisis, and the demand for a completely new way of thinking in all dimensions of life, was absolutely essential to the new the-

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ology of the young generation. There are no parallels to this at all in the British theological discourse of the 1920s.⁸ Secondly, they were linked by an offensive consensus, typical of their profession, that the only way to escape from the crisis of modernity was by courage of belief, by means of religious renewal. For many of them, theology was the science for coping with ethical crisis par excellence.

Members of the generation who were not theologians, such as Leo Löwenthal and Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Georg von Lukács, Siegfried Kracauer, and Hans Freyer wrote works in the early 1920s which show that the theologians were confirmed in many ways in their hopes for a central guiding force in religious matters. In 1921 Karl Adam postulated before Catholic academics in Stuttgart, in rhetoric reminiscent of nineteenth-century German jingoism: 'The world will flourish through Catholicism.'⁹

Not least, the crisis theologians were able to create a sense of community by deliberately and dramatically opposing the older members of their discipline, that is, above all, the liberal teachers with their historicist academic culture. The binding power of contempt, abhorrence, sometimes even hatred can be seen, for a start, in the terms used against the religiously superficial, the mystically befuddled. For the young theologians *Margarinekatholiken*, *Hatschizionisten*, and *Kulturprotestanten* constituted an ecumenical coalition of the soft, femininely weak, tired, and sentimental theologians of resignation, of impressionists without any decisive will or formative power – trapped and passively tied down to experience, committed only to experience. The images and concepts ascribed to these older religious thinkers, Harnack and Troeltsch, Hermann Cohen and Martin Buber, use the terms of medical pathology: sick, degenerate, dying off, they already stink, they represent death in the midst of life. In his programmatic manifesto of 1920 'Zwischen den Zeiten', Friedrich Gogarten declared that people did not like living amongst corpses.¹⁰ Interest in getting away from the traditional contexts of history was

⁸ See Anne-Kathrin Finke, 'Karl Barth and British Theology', *Zeitschrift für Neuere Theologiegeschichte / Journal for the History of Modern Theology*, 2 (1995), 193–224.

⁹ Karl Adam, *Glaube und Glaubenswissenschaft im Katholizismus: Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Rottenburg, 1923), 164.

¹⁰ Friedrich Gogarten, 'Zwischen den Zeiten', in Jürgen Moltmann (ed.), *Anfänge der dialektischen Theologie* (Munich, 1967), pt. 2, 95–102, at 97.

linked with a high degree of aggression which was radicalized rather than diminished by personal encounters. Hirsch wrote of the old Harnack: 'He is a ruin.'¹¹ Similarly in the inner-Jewish generational struggle, Scholem branded Buber's remarks as 'chit-chat about experience',¹² and wrote in his diary that Cohen only offered 'transcendental confusion'.¹³

The generational brothers read one another very intensively. Apart from Barth and Tillich, Rosenzweig also digested Gogarten and other dialectic theologians.¹⁴ Przywara showed great interest in all new Protestant publications and, indeed, in many Jewish ones;¹⁵ and even if the opposite is often claimed, Protestant theologians also took serious notice of Rosenberg's *Stern der Erlösung*. The generational brothers met quite often at conferences, and Karl Barth, for example, invited Przywara, the Jesuit, to speak to his students and take part in his seminar.¹⁶ Paul Tillich even developed contacts with

¹¹ See Emanuel Hirsch to Hans Lietzmann, 10 Jan. 1928, in Kurt Aland (ed.), *Glanz und Niedergang der deutschen Universität: 50 Jahre deutscher Wissenschaftsgeschichte in Briefen an und von Hans Lietzmann (1892–1942)* (Berlin, 1979), 563; Hirsch's brutal conclusion, after a visit to Harnack, commenting on his 'intellectual shrivelling', reads as follows: 'Now I forgive the man for everything, he has the right to be an invalid' (p. 564).

¹² Gershom Scholem, *Tagebücher nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923*, 2 half vols. (Frankfurt am Main, 1995–2000), 2nd half vol. 1917–23, ed. Karlfried Gründer, Herbert Kopp-Oberstebrink, and Friedrich Niewöhner, 62 (Oct.–Nov. 1917); see also Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, review of Scholem, *Tagebücher* and of Gershom Scholem, *Ursprung und Anfänge der Kabbala* (2nd edn., Berlin, 2001), published in *Zeitschrift für Neuere Theologiegeschichte / Journal for the History of Modern Theology* 10 (2003), 141–46.

¹³ Scholem, *Tagebücher*, 268 ff. (July 1918).

¹⁴ See Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Mensch und sein Werk: Briefe und Tagebücher*, ed. Rachel Rosenzweig, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1979), i. pts. 1 and 2. The correspondence of Siegfried A. Kaehler offers valuable details regarding the personal network beyond the mutual readings. See Siegfried A. Kaehler, *Briefe 1900–1963*, ed. Walter Bussmann and Günter Grünthal (Boppard, 1993).

¹⁵ For an exhaustive account see Thomas Ruster, *Die verlorene Nützlichkeit der Religion: Katholizismus und Moderne in der Weimarer Republik* (Paderborn, 1994), 268–93.

¹⁶ In this regard, see my review of Amy Marga, *Karl Barth's Dialogue with Catholicism in Göttingen and Münster: Its Significance for His Doctrine of God*

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Russian Orthodox intellectuals and met Nikolai A. Berdyaev at the Berlin Russisches Wissenschaftliches Institut in 1922.¹⁷

The nervous, self-agonizing, and inflationary world of Weimar could easily be construed as a fascinating laboratory for theological intellectual experiments. Apart from innovative re-interpretations of old dogmatic concepts, a linguistic revolution escalated encompassing virtually all disciplines. Great willingness to take risks with the semantics of religion reflected creative curiosity. The Front generation's seekers after God loved holy role-play. Only a few of them wanted to be priests or apostles; they preferred prophets, repentance-preachers, guardians, custodians, or ethical legislators who reminded an amoral culture dominated by pluralistic anomie and sceptical relativism of the absoluteness of God's law. The terminology used in the theologians' ethics discourse, so far little researched, the semantics of natural law, 'God's will', *lex divina*, 'creative will', *Volksnomos*, and 'political theology', are precisely what reveal a marked willingness for self-mobilization in the service of a better world *ordo*. In 'Das hilflose Europa oder Reise vom Hundertsten ins Tausendste' of 1922 Robert Musil wrote: 'The life that envelops us has no ordering concepts.'¹⁸ To exactly the same degree as the feuilletons elevated this finding to the fundamental feeling of the era, a theological avant-garde with missionary zeal could appropriate the leading role as creators of order with a mandate from God. It catered to the 'hunger for wholeness' (Peter Gay) with Eucharistic suppers and to modern man's 'hunger for meaning' with the totality of faith.

III. *Clash of Ideologies in the Weimar Republic, or: The Holy Warriors' Rhetoric Weaponry*

Modern European histories of religion are marked by intense ideological disputes and positional struggles between those competing to

(Tübingen, 2010), published in *Zeitschrift für Neuere Theologiegeschichte / Journal for the History of Modern Theology*, 16 (2009), 305–10.

¹⁷ Stefan G. Reichelt, *Nikolaj A. Berdjaev in Deutschland 1920–1950: Eine rezeptionshistorische Studie* (Leipzig, 1999), 28.

¹⁸ Robert Musil, 'Das hilflose Europa oder Reise vom Hundertsten ins Tausendste', in id., *Gesammelte Werke in Einzelausgaben*, ii. *Tagebücher, Aphorismen, Essays und Reden*, ed. Adolf Frisé (Hamburg, 1955), 622–40, at 633.

offer meaning. From the eighteenth century onwards there were endless *Kulturkämpfe*,¹⁹ and since the late nineteenth century many theologians and religious intellectuals had seen themselves as God's warriors in the struggle over *Weltanschauung*. Numerous leading thinkers of the theological Front generation exhibited a massive radicalization in the rhetoric of war. Typical examples are terms such as 'crusade', 'holy war', 'war for God', and 'battlefield'. They are particularly prominent in Karl Barth's writing of this period. In a study of Dialectic Theology published in 1931, the Swiss theologian Adolf Keller spoke of a new 'combative theology'.²⁰ Guardini geared up his 'fighting troops' of the Catholic youth movement for victories of formulation, *Offensiv-Katholiken* found their martial equivalent in *Kampffjuden*, and Erich Przywara preached about the need for a *Sieg-Katholizismus*, a fighting Catholicism.²¹

The fascination with war terminology cannot be explained merely by reference to the lasting effects of the war experience on these people's lives. The polemical visions of a decisive struggle over *Weltanschauung* are better explained by the interaction of a threatening pluralism, encirclement by the many others, and subjectively suffered economic and cultural weaknesses, which could be shrouded in declamatory formulae of God's power, but not effectively compensated for. Under the conditions of a parliamentary party democracy, these disagreements over *Weltanschauung* were constantly intensified in the political public. In addition, with the rapid expansion of the religious market from the 1880s onwards, alternative religious interpretations were communicated which partly served the intellectual theologians of the 1920s as resources of terminology and imagery for their new conceptions of God, but were also perceived as destructive, undermining true Jewish or Christian belief.

It was precisely the younger representatives of the discipline with their greater sensitivity to crisis who were committed to absolute self-assertion, which materialized as a rigid pathos of truth. The

¹⁹ Cf. Christopher Clark and Wolfram Kaiser (eds.), *Culture Wars: Secular-Catholic Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, 2003).

²⁰ Adolf Keller, *Der Weg der dialektischen Theologie durch die kirchliche Welt: Eine kleine Kirchenkunde der Gegenwart* (Munich, 1931), 15.

²¹ Erich Przywara, *Ringeln der Gegenwart: Gesammelte Aufsätze 1922-1927* (Augsburg, 1929), 140; for the context see Ruster, *Die verlorene Nützlichkeit der Religion*, 76-82, 268-93.

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polarization specialists focused on diastasis, guaranteed by the one God of absolute distinction, anti-synthesis, and radical talk of the death of all of modernity's gods of immanence, not least the evolutionary idols of 'historical pantheism' (Rudolf Bultmann).

Some of the Front theologians cultivated an anti-academic manner, precisely because this was how to gain career advantages and attract greater attention. The specific structure of the theological public played a crucial role in this. In the religious institutions the theologians found a receptive space that enhanced their public effectiveness. The publicity structures of the two major churches in the Weimar Republic have so far been far less researched than the worlds of communication of Jewish Germany.²² But it is clear that in and through the churches a specific attention economy for theological intellectual products was promoted. In the publishing world, for example, the feuilletons of the major daily newspapers and the cultural periodicals that directed the discourse, there was a great willingness to discuss new titles on the theological book market. Here the yet to be written histories of how the new theologies were received are not restricted to the eroding readership of the educated bourgeoisie, let alone to the feuilleton pages of the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, for which Rudolf Bultmann, for instance, wrote numerous texts and reviews.²³ Even the editors of the *Sozialistische Monatshefte* showed great interest in the religious discourse and commissioned the socialist theologian Theodor Siegfried, a like-mind of Tillich, to edify their left-wing readers with regular reviews of new titles on theology, religious studies, and religion.²⁴ The new theologies were also discussed intensively in those papers of both revolutionary and radical-conservative intellectual groups that had once been subsumed under the problematic collective term Conservative Revolution, but which represented a remarkably broad spectrum of belief.²⁵

²² Cf. Michael Brenner, *The Renaissance of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany* (New Haven, 1996).

²³ Cf. Rudolf Bultmann, *Theologie als Kritik: Ausgewählte Rezensionen und Forschungsberichte*, ed. Matthias Dreher and Klaus W. Müller (Tübingen, 2002).

²⁴ Cf. Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, art. 'Siegfried, Friedrich Adolf Theodor', in *Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon* (Herzberg, 1995), x. 104-73.

²⁵ Stefan Breuer offers a critique of the notion of Conservative Revolution. See Stefan Breuer, *Anatomie der konservativen Revolution* (2nd edn., Darmstadt, 1995); see also Gangolf Hübinger, 'Geschichtsmythen in "völkischer

IV. *Annihilatio historiae, or:
All History Turns to Dust before God*

The spectrum of topics written about and disputed by German theologians, both Christian and Jewish, in the 1920s was extremely broad. One particular complex of topics, however, attracted new and particularly intense attention: time, experience of time, understanding of history. The religious scholars talked about 'time' and 'history', 'beginning' and 'end' primarily by reformulating and reconstructing mythical notions and concepts from traditional eschatology. The dogma of *locus de novissimis*, of the last things, is traditionally one of the symbolically most complex doctrines of both Jewish and Christian theology. In the old dogmatics *de novissimis* was understood to mean the individual's post-mortal fate, the end of time, heaven and hell, and for Catholics purgatory as well, but, above all, God's judgement. Amongst the numerous eschatological symbols, the old doctrine of the *annihilatio mundi* was also passed down, which especially Lutheran theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries expounded in highly differentiated ways:²⁶ the end of all destructible substances brought about by God, the great inferno of the worlds, the definitive destruction of all worldly reality. In the discourse on eschatology of the 1920s, these old notions of *annihilatio* were reformulated in many ways; even a Jewish religious intellectual such as Gershom Scholem often spoke of 'annihilation'. To put it succinctly, the Weimar Front theologians talked about 'time' primarily in terms of the 'end of time' and about history mainly such that the transience itself, in other words, the frailty of everything historical was stressed. In the eschaton not only man, but also his history turns to dust.

The massive increase in interest in eschatology may reflect traumatic experiences of the world war. Yet the booming, polyperspecti-

Bewegung" und "konservativer Revolution": Nationalistische Wirkungen historischer Sinnbildung', in Horst Walter Blanke, Friedrich Jaeger, and Thomas Sandkühler (eds.), *Dimensionen der Historik. Geschichtstheorie, Wissenschaftsgeschichte und Geschichtskultur heute: Festschrift für Jörn Rüsen* (Cologne, 1998), 93–103.

²⁶ Konrad Stock, *Annihilatio Mundi: Johann Gerhards Eschatologie der Welt* (Munich, 1971).

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val constructions of war apocalypses in the 1920s,²⁷ and the theological language games with nothing, nihilism, annihilation were also fuelled by eschatological energies whose driving forces reached further back into the past. The Dance of Death scenes of the demise of bourgeois culture culminated in eschatological images; whoever conjured them up wanted to administer the *coup de grâce* to the despised nineteenth century.

The theological eschatologism of the early 1920s can first be seen as a radical criticism of traditional temporal terminology. Instead of a clear distinction between past, present, and future, the theologians now developed a far more multifaceted temporal terminology, with the main intention of reflecting on the acceleration of time. As expert interpreters of the fundamental differences between time and eternity, this world and the next, they had, since time immemorial, claimed for themselves perspectives on history specific to their profession. During the world war and in the early years of the Weimar Republic theologians began to reformulate traditional notions of eternity in favour of theological diagnostics of the *Zeitgeist*, in such a way that the present could be qualitatively reconceived. In competition with the many other academic constructors of history they developed their own very distinct theological views. Traditional concepts of time were differentiated with great experimental enthusiasm, their boundaries removed and redefined. In his early sermons Paul Tillich, for example, talked of the 'spirit of eternity', 'people of eternity', 'stamp of eternity', 'depth of eternity', 'silence of eternity', and 'value of eternity'.²⁸ These amalgams of the concept of eternity made it possible for him to interpret the *hic et nunc* of the present *sub specie aeternitatis* more succinctly than the conventional dogmatic language games: eternity as a *longue durée* that encompasses the present, defines the now, deepens the moment, beyond which nothing more lasting or foundational can be conceived.

The theologians and religious virtuosi of the Front generation also developed differentiations for the concept of history, which, with all

²⁷ For detailed accounts see Klaus Vondung, *Die Apokalypse in Deutschland* (Munich, 1988); and Jürgen Brokoff, *Die Apokalypse in der Weimarer Republik* (Munich, 2001).

²⁸ Paul Tillich, *Frühe Predigten (1909–1918)*, ed. Erdmann Sturm, *Ergänzungs- und Nachlaßbände zu den Gesammelten Werken*, vii (Berlin, 1994), 414, 428, 134, 554, 485, 134.

respect, make the historians' terminology seem comparatively paltry. For instance, theologians took up the concept of super-history as propagated by Schelling in his *Philosophie der Offenbarung* and, with a view to God's radical transcendence and self-revelation, now spoke a great deal about metahistory. Karl Barth talks of 'prehistory', 'revelation history', 'God's history', 'history of the word of God', 'final history', 'earthly history', 'heavenly history', 'history of God's kingdom', and 'history of God in history'. What is more, theologians now wrote enthusiastically about the 'ultimate fate of the world', of 'super-historical forces', and the 'materialization of the super-historical'. They repeatedly stressed that the history of the professional historians was dead history, a pale cult of relics, mere academic corpse-plundering, which must be considered as always already annihilated by God if the historicist graveyards were to be left behind.²⁹

So *Annihilatio historiae* means that one can imagine the paltriness of the historical, expose its frailty, as relief from the pressure of tradition. Gogarten's 'People don't like living amongst corpses' and Barth's fight against the 'modern de-eschatologized consciousness' convey the message that for theologians 'historical vision' is something quite different from the specialist, particularizing insights which historians command *ex professione*. The historical realities that can be grasped from the viewpoints of professional historians were, they maintained, just shadowy realities, just superficial, empty show, the path into a ghostly realm of shades. For them, true history was higher—or, indeed, lower—in any case, beyond those events and developments that the professional historians receive and reconstruct. To this extent, theologians claimed to be able to grasp a truer reality.³⁰

²⁹ See Kurt Nowak, 'Die "antihistoristische Revolution": Symptome und Folgen historischer Weltorientierung nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg in Deutschland', in Horst Renz and Friedrich Wilhelm Graf (eds.), *Umstrittene Moderne: Die Zukunft der Neuzeit im Urteil der Epoche Ernst Troeltschs* (Gütersloh, 1987), 133–71; Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, 'Die "antihistoristische Revolution" in der protestantischen Theologie der zwanziger Jahre', in Jan Rohls and Gunther Wenz (eds.), *Vernunft des Glaubens. Wissenschaftliche Theologie und kirchliche Lehre: Festschrift zum 60. Geburtstag von Wolfhart Pannenberg* (Göttingen, 1988), 377–405.

³⁰ Werner Elert, *Der Kampf um das Christentum: Geschichte der Beziehungen zwischen dem evangelischen Christentum in Deutschland und dem allgemeinen Denken seit Schleiermacher und Hegel* (Munich, 1921), 489.

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The exploratory theological adventures at conferences of the Quickborn-Bund – ‘We dig below the layers of culture into the absolute’³¹ – display this self-conception as an epistemological elite. Anyone who did not break away from the groundedness of history sacrificed perceptual opportunities. Thus in one of his obituaries for Ernst Troeltsch, Paul Tillich remarked concerning Troeltsch’s ‘European cultural synthesis’: ‘It is a historical standpoint from which history is judged, but not *the* super-historical, which is the only one capable of interpreting history.’³² The theologians’ writings of the 1920s contain veritable legions of the new, emotionalized formulae of super-historical, meta-historical transcendentals of history. In 1925 Martin Dibelius summed it up soberly: ‘Perception of the super-historical cannot be achieved by the historian’s means of acquiring knowledge.’³³ The theologians became all the more committed to a new anatomy of theological thought, for example, through dogmatic language games or in the form of a specifically theological historicism and philosophy of history. Their intensive work on time theories, temporal semantics, and new concepts of eschatology culminated in intellectual attempts to make the historical moment transparent in terms of God’s presence, notwithstanding the transcendence of God they had embraced. Theodor Siegfried, for example, demanded that eschatology *de futuro* should be converted into present-day eschatology. The dichotomy between continuity and diastasis was overcome by the hermeneutics of contemporaneity; time that lasts for ever mutated into explosive time, the moment, the minimal period of time, was fascinating as the opposite of eternity, and simultaneously as its most important place of representation. From 1916, the theological debates of all three confessions contain contemporarizations of the ‘eternal moment’ owing partly to Goethe, partly to Stefan George. Ever new variations of the theme that paid homage to the ‘fulfilled’, ‘historical’, ‘absolute’ moment eventually produced a sort of explosive condensation of all concepts of the moment in the *kairos*, which, in the spirit of George’s

³¹ Hermann Platz, speaker at the Quickborn-Bund’s 1920 federal conference, cited in Ruster, *Die verlorene Nützlichkeit der Religion*, 84.

³² Paul Tillich, ‘Ernst Troeltsch’, in *Vossische Zeitung*, 3 Feb. 1923, reprinted in Friedrich Wilhelm Graf (ed.), *Ernst Troeltsch in Nachrufen* (Gütersloh, 2002), 249–52, at 251.

³³ Martin Dibelius, *Geschichtliche und übergeschichtliche Religion im Christentum* (Göttingen, 1925), 170.

terminological magic, was communicated in a particularly suggestive manner by Friedrich Gundolf as a new keyword. In 1922 Paul Tillich then elevated *kairos* to the central concept of his action theory of time, which he developed in contrast to Troeltsch's all too linear historical thinking.³⁴

Something structurally similar can be seen in the dramatic boom in Messianic rhetoric, not only amongst young Jewish intellectuals, but also amongst both Catholic and Protestant theologians. Of the numerous relevant new concepts I refer, as an example, to Walter Benjamin's theology of time, which he developed particularly succinctly in his later theses 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte'.³⁵ Benjamin talks there of the 'Messiah', of 'messianic power', indeed of 'messianic time' and the 'messianic empire'. For the philosophers of history it becomes absolutely crucial, in the sense of the Messianic tradition, to think of salvation in terms of this world and therefore to identify with 'social liberation'. Messiah—in Benjamin's interpretative cosmos, this is a cipher for the fact that people can activate their own 'messianic power' in order to disrupt the continuum of history geared towards exploitation and suppression.³⁶ In relation to God, the 'moment' here means being outside oneself.

The visual semantics of theology were also updated. Where theologians in the 1920s spoke of 'eye' and 'seeing', they sought to occupy super-human 'points of view'. In the tradition of the old images of 'God's eye',³⁷ Karl Barth, in his first interpretation of the Epistles to the Romans, referred back to a godly 'central perspective'. The equivalent in Franz Rosenzweig was the 'total subject' which could encompass the entirety of the super-natural object. The crucial systematic achievement in both cases was to be able to identify a subject that has always been regarded as a blessed participant in God's perspective. For Barth this subject, faithful to God, was the church, which listened

³⁴ Alf Christophersen, *Kairos: Protestantische Zeitdeutungskämpfe in der Weimarer Republik* (Tübingen, 2008).

³⁵ Walter Benjamin, 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte', in id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, i. pt. 2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main, 1974), 694 ff.

³⁶ Ibid. 700 ff.

³⁷ For this tradition of representation in the context of the 'confusingly colourful' eye-imagery, see Michael Stolleis, *Das Auge des Gesetzes: Geschichte einer Metapher* (2nd edn., Munich, 2004).

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to the word of God; for Rosenzweig it was the eternal Israel. In *Stern der Erlösung* Rosenzweig wrote that the Jews were located outside history and politics, 'outside a bellicose temporality'. He advised them to remain there, 'for other nations, also on the path towards God, needed history; the Jews, who were already with God, did not'.³⁸ Naturally all these formulations also reveal the systemic problem of the new theological super-history rhetoric. What does it mean to take up a metahistorical point of view, or an absolutist position? What theological intellectual strategies can prevent a relative place of seeing and interpreting being elevated into an absolute position, God's self-revelation from being functionalized for the legitimacy sacralization of minority standpoints? Just as in the temporal language game of theology the old is definitively declared as past and a space is opened up for the absolutely new, so the question concerning the power to define the 'eternal moment' acquires central significance. Who can and should decide where God's absolute transcendence appears in the absolute moment?

V. Apokatastasis toon pantoon, or: *The Re-creation of History*

The warehouse of symbols of both Christian and Jewish eschatology contains the notion of the *apokatastasis toon pantoon*, the gracious restoration, at the end of time, of everything that has been. This notion was traditionally regarded as heretical, because it also granted to potential inhabitants of Hell the possibility of rising to heavenly Paradise. After Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher and David Friedrich Strauß, the 'restoration of all' quickly became established in Protestant theology. This was hotly disputed in the 1920s. The subtle scholarly struggle between theological dogmatists can be deciphered as the question of which imagined contents could refill the notional historical space that had been annihilated eschatologically. For no one can live long-term 'between times', and anyone who celebrates the *kairos* of God's presence must be able to define it in terms of

³⁸ Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Stern der Erlösung* (Frankfurt am Main, 1921), 416, quoted from Amos Funkenstein, 'Die Dialektik der Assimilation', in Ulrich Raulff and Gary Smith (eds.), *Wissensbilder: Strategien der Überlieferung* (Berlin, 1999), 203–19, at 213–14.

places where God is represented in this world. If the historical universe is annihilated, then as a potentially unlimited space for imagination it cannot only be re-measured, but also filled with many 'quite real' super-historical histories, indeed with representations of the divine. Like the historical images of the George School, normative selection is preferred to researching and collecting. The 'greats' of the past function as power-sources for the present, absent-minded wandering about in the endless picture-galleries of history is transformed into concentrated 'intellectual vision' and 'history of forces'.³⁹ The new post-historical concepts of history took shape, for example, in the 'Luther renaissance' and the 'Jewish renaissance'. Such diverse religious projects of the 1920s as Scholem's Hasidim research, Buber's and Rosenzweig's 'Verdeutschung der Schrift', Bultmann's studies on historical and super-historical religion in Christianity,⁴⁰ and Barth's Christian dogmatics are all agreed in using counter-historical memoria to develop commitments for shaping the present. Scholem worked on the authority of 'God's law' and described the Bible as 'the absolute text'. And Barth's dogmatics were also supposed to be nothing but a specific form of textual interpretation, marked by pure fidelity to the word of God.

What remained disputed was how revelation is conveyed, how the absolute appears in the relative, and how the momentary presence of the unfixable absolute can be fixed in the relative—a topic of violent disputes about the concept of analogy and here, in particular, the Old Catholic notion of an *analogia entis*. But God's law could also be reified in the 'holy Volkstum', for instance, in the case of Scholem, Althaus, and various Catholic theologians, and the people could not become fully aware of the presence of God without a charismatic 'leader'. At the same time a dispute erupted between the representatives of the various Christian confessions as to whether the hoped-for vanquishing of historicism was not much more likely in specifically Catholic figures of thought than in genuinely Protestant terminology. In his obituary for Ernst Troeltsch, Przywara declared that only the

³⁹ Ulrich Raulff, 'Der Bildungshistoriker Friedrich Gundolf', in Friedrich Gundolf, *Anfänge deutscher Geschichtsschreibung von Tschudi bis Winckelmann* (Frankfurt am Main, 1992), 123–4.

⁴⁰ Rudolf Bultmann, 'Geschichtliche und übergeschichtliche Religion im Christentum? [1926]', in id., *Glauben und Verstehen: Gesammelte Schriften* (Tübingen, 1933), i. 65–84.

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Roman church represented the 'ultimate unity of absolute and relative that Troeltsch strove for in vain'.⁴¹ And Erik Peterson also presented the Catholic Church as the place for the definitive abolition of relativism. With a view to the historical relativism practised mainly by Protestant historians he decreed uncompromisingly that 'Considering the (altar) sacrament, to talk of historical relativism becomes blasphemy', and sums up his contempt for all conventionally taught concepts of history in a laconic, cold sentence: 'The historian should hang himself, like Judas.'⁴²

Despite their basic agreement about replacing the liberal pre-war theologies, the crisis theologians of the 1920s were incapable of reaching consensus on the guiding concepts and dogmatic methods of a distinctly post-historical theology of authority. It was precisely in the fascinating diversity of their search that they radicalized theological pluralism, which they had complained about so verbally, and which soon culminated in an ever intensifying dispute on all sides concerning the place in which God was represented in history. The theological Front generation experienced the plural religious and ethical worlds of the Wilhelmine era as the dissolution of all substantial obligations, and in this *kairos* struggle against the relative they could, in fact, only intensify the pluralistic hallmark of 'classical modernity'. At the end of the 1920s the Weimar pantheon was full of absolutely binding monotheistic figures of God, each representing the one true God of biblical self-revelation and which should therefore testify to absolute faith. De facto, however, these were just tribal idols, 'gods of the moment',⁴³ of individual groups and movements – there was not a single political ideology in the late Weimar republic that was not supported by an exclusive god in the theological field.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Erich Przywara, 'Ernst Troeltsch', *Stimmen der Zeit*, 105 (1923), 75–9, reprinted in Graf (ed.), *Ernst Troeltsch in Nachrufen*, 452–7, at 457.

⁴² Cited in Christoph Marksches, 'Heis Theos? Religionsgeschichte und Christentum bei Erik Peterson', in Barbara Nichtweiß (ed.), *Vom Ende der Zeit. Geschichtstheologie und Eschatologie bei Erik Peterson: Symposium Mainz 2000* (Münster, 2001), 38–74, at 38.

⁴³ Hermann Usener, *Götternamen: Versuch einer Lehre von der religiösen Begriffsbildung* (Bonn, 1896).

⁴⁴ See now Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, *Der Heilige Zeitgeist: Studien zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte der protestantischen Theologie in der Weimarer Republik* (Tübingen, 2010).

New Theologies in the Weimar Republic

So the fundamental political 'world civil war' of the inter-war period was not overcome by theological reflection on normativity: strictly speaking it was actually intensified by religious terminology. In the certainty that they were only interpreting the word of God, they had to destroy with iconoclastic zeal all the false idols of the other participants in the theological discourse. Anyone who, with God, conceived of the present as a place of action beyond all historical mediation, as the field for absolute deeds, could do little else but perceive the pluralization of such versions of God as an escalation of tension. In the same place and at the same time the god-fearing people of this decade were living in non-simultaneous ideological worlds. This also gave rise to a permanent dynamic of intensification in the theological discourses of the 1920s.

VI. *Exaltation Specialists, or: Thinking Ambivalence in the Political Field*

In 1922 Carl Schmitt established in his *Politische Theologie* that metaphysics is the most intensive and clearest expression of an era: 'The metaphysical image that a particular era makes of the world has the same structure as the form of political organization that it automatically prefers.'⁴⁵ In the Weimar Republic the fundamental tectonic shifts in the political gave rise to intensive debates about new political theologies. In their anxiety to interpret the present, the theologians now became embroiled in fundamental political controversies, which always led them to read supposedly metapolitical dogmatic language games, including the most intricate doctrinal distinctions, politically as well. Apart from the German Democratic Party (DPP) activist Rudolf Bultmann who remained faithful to the republic,⁴⁶ there was a high level of consensus here about anti-bourgeois emotionalism and anti-liberal conviction. Nonetheless the spectrum of political positions amongst the Weimar exaltation theologians was more multifaceted, more contradictory than is often assumed.

People like to stage the history of Weimar intellectuals by means of clear interpretative models that can be utilized both politically and

⁴⁵ Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie: Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität* (Berlin, 1922), 59–60.

⁴⁶ Cf. Konrad Hammann, *Rudolf Bultmann: Eine Biographie* (Tübingen, 2009).

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morally: good liberals versus bad anti-liberals; republican left against anti-republican right; revolutionary-utopian messianism versus conservative-restorative messianism; modern Ullstein authors versus anti-modern, regressive Grünewaldverlag authors. However, the way in which the Weimar theologian-intellectuals formulated their opinions and positions meant that they considered such dualisms and oppositional figures as far too superficial and deliberately reductionist. In spite of *kairos* rhetoric the characteristic mood of the decade remains not the spectacular contrast between the lightness of belief and black shadowy darkness, between blazing lightness and all-encompassing night remote from God, but rather the diffuse twilight of ambivalence, changing and ambiguous.

Irritating examples of a high degree of political ambivalence can be found not only amongst leading Catholic and Protestant intellectuals of the anti-republican right-wing parties. The intellectual worlds of prominent Jewish theologians and religious intellectuals also reflect elementary phenomena of political oscillation. Understandably, until well into the 1980s the trauma of the annihilation of the Jews of central Europe prevented perception of the great religious, theological, and political diversity within the German-Jewish minorities. But a new look at the charnel-houses of knowledge now show, for example, that Franz Rosenzweig's death masks, removed by intellectual historians, only portrayed his contradictory intellectual physiognomy in a one-sided, distorted way. The Frankfurt Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus is readily associated with the trade union movement; messianic left-wing intellectuals with the Institut für Sozialforschung. But in the early years of the Weimar Republic the author of the *Stern der Erlösung* located himself in a quite different political framework. During the world war the passionate Wagner-fan was an aggressive radical nationalist who despised the 'democratic thick-heads' of the new republic. When, to his utter despair, the Kapp Putsch failed, he hoped, *horribile dictu*, for a 'southern German counter-revolution' against the Weimar coalitionists in Berlin.⁴⁷

The Protestant scenes of politicized theology are equally shrouded in ambiguity. Theologians in the religious-socialist groups shared fundamental values and political ordering concepts with colleagues who then took the side of the Deutsche Christen in the Church

⁴⁷ See my review of the new edition of Rosenzweig's *'Gritli'-Briefe* (see n. 6 above), esp. 153–4.

Struggle after 1933 and celebrated with enthusiasm the National Socialist 'German Revolution'. Paul Tillich, of all people, whom people liked to revere as the representative of a better Germany because of his enforced exile, left his (reader) community, who were waiting for political identification of the *kairos*, in uncertainty about his path through the 'new era' until 1934. In particular the *Sozialistische Entscheidung* published in December 1932 and later read as a document decisively rejecting National Socialism, exposes the high level of ambivalence in a totalizing mode of thought that is supposed to merge right and left together in a unity of will of religious substance. Tillich took up the terminology of race and *Volkstum* here, so that his close friend Emanuel Hirsch, a very convinced supporter of the Nazis, read the political tract as 'a discernable conversion to National Socialism'.⁴⁸ At that time Tillich himself could not imagine that the German Revolution would lead to a really new *Volksgemeinschaft* without his own energetic intellectual commitment.

Finally, a few brief words about the complex pattern of theological interpretations of the National Socialist revolution. Many theologians acted in a contradictory way, and the stylization of Hitler into the national Messiah even attracted criticism from supporters of National Socialism. Thus, for example, in 1933 Paul Althaus criticized political expectations exaggerated by 'false messianic inflation'.⁴⁹ In 1931 Richard Karwehl had already interpreted National Socialism as 'secularized eschatology'. Here, he said, 'Jewish messianism' was being replaced by 'Germanic messianism'.⁵⁰ But the distinctions between eschatology legitimized or not legitimized by the church remained hotly disputed amongst theologians. So the revolution of 1933 seems like a gigantic projection screen for shaping theological fantasies. In the dynamics of self-mobilization, experienced as

⁴⁸ See Emanuel Hirsch's letter to Paul Tillich, 14 Apr. 1933, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Paul Tillich Papers: 'Dear Paul, much to my dismay I have just read in the newspaper . . . about your suspension as well. I regret that your growing tendencies toward National Socialism already discernible in your last book, which you belong to (even though [you] do not know yet) and for which you could have been a prudent and responsible spiritual leader, are questioned so suddenly.'

⁴⁹ Cf. Paul Althaus, *Die deutsche Stunde der Kirche* (Göttingen, 1933), 29.

⁵⁰ Richard Karwehl, 'Politisches Messiasstum: Zur Auseinandersetzung zwischen Kirche und Nationalsozialismus', *Zwischen den Zeiten*, 9 (1931), 519-43.

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liberation, the theologian-intellectuals also hoped to be able to steer the revolutionary process normatively. Declaration of belief, whether in Barmen or by the Catholic bishops, then seemed like a new restriction on a discursive horizon that had been continually de-restricted in Weimar—even by many of those later active in the ranks of the Confessing Church.

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