

THREE LETTERS BETWEEN CARL SCHMITT AND JACOB TAUBES

1.

Carl Schmitt to Jacob Taubes – November 29, 1977

Plettenberg-Pasel

Esteemed Mr. Taubes,

I'm answering your phone call of November 17 with gratitude and prepared. We still have to find an adequate wavelength. These lines are no more than an acknowledgment of receipt, and, as an acknowledgment, they are something more. Belatedly (epi-methically), your call brought my miserable situation towards Leo Strauss to my full conscience. His essay of 1962, "Spinoza's Critique of Religion", was unknown to me, when I wrote my "Hobbes Cristall" (1963) and my essay "Reformation Fulfilled" (1965). Both were addressed to Leo Strauss; in this kind of *dialogue*, I was defeated right from the start.

All this cannot be explained by writing, above all not in the handwriting of a ninety-years old. Thus I will give a quick and short reply to the peculiar topic of your letter:

I appreciate your suggestion to publish chapter five of my "Leviathan" of 1938 in the journal you are planning as a merit; it's something else and more than "pour le mérite". What makes it impossible for me to accept is my situation and that of my destroyed image, my "figure", which has been quite brutally cast into my face in recent weeks and months. But let us not spend a long time with this. It has taken more than twenty years to philologically clarify such a simple and documentarily clear case like that of the Benjamin letter of 1930, at least for *some*, single interested people. May I now try to explain why I'm asking you for an understanding of my reluctance?

Everything which still counts for me at present is a question of political theology. At the end of his life, even Max Weber, a revanchist of the Versailles peace treaty of 1918/19, became openly what he was: a political theologian. In respect of me, it means, what Hugo Ball declared in 1924: "he (CS) experienced his time by the conscious form of his talent", and it was a specifically *juridical* talent. By it, I am able to make a distinction between *nomos* and *norm*, which is a fundamental and constitutional distinction of which today's juridical positivism deprives itself by self-mutilation.

The title and name of your newly planned journal is *Kassiber*. A specifically declaration belongs to such a name's aura, which lets a jurist write something different from any other. This indication may suffice; it is no judgement of your aims and intentions. I express it in

order to let a suggestion and mission like that of November 17 not *categorically* without thanking.

In the meantime, I'm dwelling on Habakkuk 2:2ff and Second Thessalonians 2:6ff: *Abyssus vocat Abyssum*. On Hermann Cohen hopefully another time: he's been present to me from 1912 to 1977; he *rests* present above all, as the discussion of *values* has not quite started. Value and life, it is this topic of which Cohen is still more actual than brave Schopenhauer, whose philosophy of law and state is a hundred percent clinged to that of Hobbes'.

Ever yours,

Carl Schmitt

[Original: German Literary Archive Marbach, Estate Hans Blumenberg; translated by Martin Treml]

2.

Jacob Taubes to Carl Schmitt – September 18, 197[8]

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Esteemed Mr. Schmitt:

Let me thank you again for your friendly, indeed amicable, reception, for your patience, and for your openness in speaking also of the failures in the long life of a legist. Even in his failures, if I may vary a line that still rings in my ear from Student days, "an incomparable political teacher."

Precisely as an arch-Jew, I know to hesitate before condemning someone. Because in all the unutterable horror we were spared one thing. We had no choice: Hitler chose us as absolute enemy. But where there is no choice, there may also be no judgment, least of all of others. Which doesn't mean that I am not pursued by the wish to understand what "really" (not at all in the historical sense, but more in the eschatological sense of the emergency situation happened – where the switches were set toward catastrophe (our catastrophe *and* yours). Which, however, brings us to the topic of political theology, to that "Parthian attack" by Peterson.

The upright and solid work of the Heidelbergers has, as I have already indicated to you, only served to bring out the problem more clearly. Everything important is already in *Political*

Theology II, albeit as a critique of Peterson – without noticing that Peterson’s “weaknesses” are his strength, his topicality in 1935. Dedicated to Sancto Augustino, introduced with a prayer that this Church Father at a “turn of the ages” (I’m citing from memory) also stand by us today, closing with a reference to Carl Schmitt’s *Political Theology*, with a final remark, exiled to a footnote, about the theological impossibility of political theology – this entirely unique introduction and conclusion was (and is) completely directed toward you. What is important for so distinguished a stylist as Peterson is not (only) what he repeats often, and what can (and should) therefore be processed with a computer, but one must above all attend to what is introduced for one time only, in a flash, his “leap” (from Eusebius to Augustine) is what it is important to notice. As if “Professor” Erik Peterson would not himself have “noticed” this and had not been able, had he wanted to, to “better” prepare it in an academically competent manner!

Unique, as you yourself noticed, are the expression *Führer*, unique the mention of “Christian ideology” for Eusebius’s theologoumenon. Astonishing, too, the reference to *City of God* 3:30, which yields nothing “historically”, which in 1935, in an explosively topical way (*caecus atque improvidus futurorum* [“so blind and unable to see the future”]), addresses itself to you in a coded warning – and fails to reach you. You did not have a better friend than Peterson, whom you also led onto the path to the ecclesia. “Faithful are the wounds a friend’s arrow inflicts” (quickly in Hebrew: *ne’emanim pitsei ohev*), the Psalmist says someplace [Proverbs 27:6] (no Bible to hand, here in the “Maison”). This is no “Parthian arrow”, but a Christian one, the arrow of Peterson.

Although I don’t take it lightly at all that the Nazi program spoke of “positive Christianity” and that this was taken “seriously” by both Catholics and Protestants (they wanted to take it seriously, but they also could: Hitler and Goebbels had, after all, never left the “church”, that is, if I understand correctly, they paid their “church tax” until the end!); still, with the “race question”, a political “theo-zoology” (this expression is not mine, but comes from Liebenfels, who means it “positively” and hands it off to Hitler) was introduced and heralded in, which should have made people pay attention. Is this not so? I can’t hear this from inside the church – I simply want to learn to “understand” why the limit was not felt here, despite Romans 13. At the moment I am trying to read my way dutifully through the newer Hobbes literature and can’t get over my astonishment at the extent to which it reads past the text – while Hobbes himself, in word and image, left no room for Interpretation about the fact that the *Leviathan* discusses the Situation of the Commonwealth as (first) ecclesiastical (and then) civil. Thus I must return to your now forty-year-old little book about the symbol of the Leviathan and can

only harbor sad thoughts about scholarly progress. I don't know whether one ought not to read Hobbes even more literally than you propose. Why should Leviathan be considered only a "literary idea"? Hobbes is dead serious when he speaks of the "great Leviathan", that "mortal God" to whom we owe – and this is the decisive point – "peace and defense" "under the immortal God". This is also why "that Jesus i[s] the Christ" is not an empty phrase, but an ever-returning principle. This is why the machine of the state is not a *perpetuum mobile*, a thousand-year Reich, *sine fine*, but thus mortally a fragile balance between inside and outside, thus mortally also always defeated. It was not only the "first liberal Jew" who discovered this "barely visible crack", but the Apostle Paul (also highly "valued" by the "first liberal Jew"), to whom I turn at the turn of the ages, distinguished inside and outside, also for "the political". Without this distinction we are exposed to the thrones and powers that in a "monistic" cosmos no longer know any Beyond. The boundary between spiritual and worldly may be controversial and is always to be drawn anew (a neverending task of political theology), but should this Separation cease, we will run out of (Occidental) breath – and so would Thomas Hobbes, who, as always, distinguishes "power ecclesiastical and civil". Your reference to Barion's reference in the Savigny Journal is worth libraries of the Hobbes "literature". I'm going to Zurich, where the material is easier for me to find (here I can find neither Barion nor Kempf) and want to begin from this reference (which I might suggest also surpasses and sharpens your Hobbes book), in order to launch the Hobbes-Spinoza lecture course – to students who at best have Strauss, and at worst Macpherson, as a guide. The lecture course is a risky enterprise in the Marxoid atmosphere; it also consciously, with a note "for advanced students only", demarcates itself from the marketplace of *Philosophicum* students that we serve at the Institute, and it will likely not be open to the public – which can only be to its benefit.

Rest assured *non jam frustra doces* Carl Schmitt ["Carl Schmitt, now you do not teach in vain!"], also because of the failures and ill-fated blows (including the one against poor Julius Stahl, which I privately applaud). Perhaps there will still come a moment at which we can speak about what is to me the most significant Jewish as well as Christian political theology, Romans 9-11. The word "enemy" also appears there, in the absolute sense, but – and this seems to me to be the most decisive of decisive points – connected with "loved". That these chapters were "on the agenda" in 1935 (and that they still are in 1978) is something that Peterson, your critic (outwardly) and your best friend (inwardly), knew, and this differentiates him supremely from the existentialisms of his most important contemporary in New

Testament exegesis, Rudolf Bultmann. By way of Peterson, many a person will still find their way – will still have to find their way – to Plettenberg.

With friendly greetings,

Jacob Taubes

[translated by Dana Hollander]

3.

Carl Schmitt to Jacob Taubes – November 24, 1978

[Plettenberg-Pasel]

Dear and esteemed Mr. Taubes,

These two days of your visit were precious to me and will keep agitating me all of my life, non-withstanding the length of my life expectancy in regard to the statistics of population. I'm cordially thanking you! Above all for your patience and your negligence concerning my marginal situation and the miseries of my old-age, which must be almost unreasonable for others! Yesterday afternoon I forgot to give you the attached photocopy of my essay on Daeubler of 1916, which you find with these lines, take another photocopy for your own collection of material and then send me the attached one back. The fate of everything printed concerning Daeubler is dreadful, I must not be silent on that, but warn you. A topography in the style of Wolfgang Fietkau would constitute an event in Europe, even under the viewpoint of the possible condition of a noble prize respectively of a nomination for it, this is said for fruitful heuristics, not only in mere irony.

Once more all good wishes and thank you so much for the favour of your visit!

Your old Carl Schmitt

[Original: Center for the Study of Literature and Culture Berlin, Estate Jacob Taubes, translated by Martin Tremml]