Inverse Versus Dialectical Theology
The Two Faces of Negativity and the Miracle of Faith

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In memory of Hendrik Johan (Han) Adriaanse (1940–2012)

Paul’s God plays dice.
—Jacob Taubes, The Political Theology of Paul

Few recent philosophical readings of Paul and his modern reception are
more fraught with ambiguity than Jacob Taubes’s impromptu commentary on the Epistle to the Romans in The Political Theology of Paul. Taubes alternates between contentious claims about the “messianic logic” first summarized and analyzed by Gershom Scholem (“my teacher,” Taubes says, although the admiration wasn’t mutual)—and a host of now exuberant, now scathing comments on a whole series of thinkers in Critical Theory, biblical hermeneutics, philosophy, and psychoanalysis. His “style,” as Martin Tremml has aptly characterized it, is that of “the last expressionistic thinker of German Judaism, who grabbed onto the last corner of the Jewish prayer shawl as it was flying away—as wrote Franz Kafka, whom Taubes called ‘the Raschi before Auschwitz.’” Like Scholem in a letter to Benjamin, Tremml argues that Taubes comes close to attributing to Kafka “the opposite [das Revers]” of kabbalistic doctrine, claiming that, instead of praising the positivity of God’s creation, he emphasizes in its place the “nothingness of revelation [Nichts der Offenbarung].”

Mutatis mutandis, Taubes’s dialectical negations set up a critical foil against which the—now minimal, now maximal—contours of a different, an “inverse,” theology become visible, drawn with the faintest of lines, yet introduced with the greatest aplomb. Whereas his seminar
on Paul seems at first to offer only a sharp, deeply personal, and idiosyncratic portrait of a whole generation, on further reflection, Taubes’s observations suggest a deeper cultural “logic” of “messianism” and its political analogues that has lost none of its relevance for our understanding of a Judeo-Christian “apocalyptic” that should be conceived “from the bottom up,” not—following imperial, sovereign, authoritarian, or bourgeois historical models—“from the top down,” allowing us to glimpse an irreverent, anarchic impulse in political theology.

“Absolute Inversion”

Taubes places Paul in the context of the “messianic logic” that animates the Jewish tradition and “occidental eschatology” as a whole. Building upon a long-established consensus concerning the links between Paul and Rabbinic Judaism, Taubes sees Paul not as a “Christian” but as a Jewish “fanatic” and “zealot” (his words), an eschatologist and apocalyptic. Taubes treats all of these terms as synonymous. He is intrigued by Paul’s “political genius,” as demonstrated by the fact that his most telling letter is addressed “not to any other community, but to the community in Rome, the seat of the world-empire,” thereby revealing “a sense of where to find power and where a counter-power needs to be established.”

Starting with its opening address, Taubes claims, this letter constitutes a “political theology, a political declaration of war on the emperors [Cäsaren].” Bruno Bauer has similarly written that “Christian literature is a literature of protest against the flourishing cult of the Caesar,” just as Taubes seeks to remind his readers that the “whole Torah” is, in fact, “anti-Egyptian; even the nonmention of the resurrection in the Torah is anti-Egyptian.”

In the Letter to the Romans, this plays itself out in the opening words, which announce Paul as apostle and Jesus Christ as “his Anti-Caesar”:

Paul, a servant [or slave] of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all nations, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. (Rom. 1:1–6)

Taubes reads Paul as a “troublemaker,” who, as the founding father of the gentile churches, endangers the position of Judaism as a tolerated religion (religio licita), disturbing “the precarious balance of Jews who were able to get around the emperor cult without
being accused of revolution.” Hence, Taubes extrapolates with a sweeping accusation reminiscent of Scholem, Paul distances himself from the whole “diaspora mentality,” which continues to the present day and which prefers a particular and relative outsider position (“Just keep things quiet, don’t stick out and so on”) and hence the “status quo” instead of the revolutionary—and radically universalist—claims of messianic logic.

In contrast to the religious attitude of acquiescence and assimilation, Paul is identified with a strategy of “absolute inversion,” of invoking an “anti-symbol” that, for all its concentration on the resurrection of Christ, is paradoxically in sync with some of the most orthodox currents in Judaism. Paul’s illiberalism (both religious and political) is one of Taubes’s most insistent themes, though he never forgets the “racist theozooology” that, between 1933 and 1936, Schmitt “grafted” onto the “folk traditions of church antisemitism.”

Taubes develops this motif via parallels between Paul’s world and ours, marking the difference between “literary exegesis,” on the one hand, and “historical, concrete memory” of the “structure” of communal relationships in the early church—especially the matter of “legitimation”—on the other. Yet Taubes does not find the “present actuality” of the logic of messianism, which he ascribes to Paul and the rabbinical tradition alike, in conceptual, analytical, or demonstrative theogogies and philosophemes. Rather, with what seems a Catholic rather than a Protestant gesture, Taubes declares his ambition “to develop theology out of liturgy,” and he praises Franz Rosenzweig for having offered an interpretation of Judaism—and Christianity—based not on texts or dogmas but on liturgy, in particular, on the liturgy of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. He writes: “And Paul, after all, if one tries to summarize it, speaks of nothing other than atonement [Versöhnung].” A paradoxical “inner experience”—not to be confused with any “magical function”—of forgiveness, of a “day that forgives,” is at work here, one rooted in the concrete-historical tradition and liturgy that also serves as the basis for Rabbinic Judaism.

Hence Taubes’s contempt for tendencies toward ontologization and liberalization in biblical scholarship, especially in scriptural hermeneutics: “I believe the texts that are close [to the events in question] more than [Rudolf] Bultmann’s pupils, especially those of the second generation.” And yet Taubes shares with Bultmann at least one ambition: not the program of demythologization in view of an existential—or worse, existentialist—reading but the destruction of all myth, pure and simple. This is one of the most Benjaminian of Taubes’s overall themes, together with an appeal to a sensus allegoricus that, he insists, is “not only textual but a form of life,” more precisely, an understanding of “the link of the pneumatic as life experience with allegorical textual experience.”

Interestingly, Taubes credits Spinoza, not Luther, with the invention of modern biblical criticism, that is to say, with an emphasis on the historical and literal senses of a text and therefore with an “attempt to cut off the basis or lifeline of church and synagogue interpretation, that is, of Rabbinic and Christian interpretation, by recognizing the sensus
historicus or the sensus literalis exclusively as the sensus out of which a text may be interpreted. Indeed, Taubes continues: “Now, whether or not that is demonstrated more geometrico in the Ethics, certainly in the Tractatus Theologico-Politicus it is the sensus nudus.” Taubes also develops his reading of Paul in terms of ritual practice with explicit reference to the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar, whose courses he had attended and whose Apocalypse of the German Soul, published in three volumes from 1937 through 1939, had deeply impressed him. In fact, Taubes’s Occidental Eschatology has been seen as a critical Jewish rejoinder to the work of von Balthasar, one of the first commentators on the work of Karl Barth, also a major source of inspiration for Taubes’s lectures.

The Need for Legitimation

The way in which Paul introduces himself to the Christian community of Rome is dictated by the “restlessness” of someone “who as thirteenth apostle is of course not an apostle at all” and hence feels a “need for legitimation.” The reasons seem clear enough: “This brand new generation doesn’t know, of course, what it really is. It wasn’t with the Lord, didn’t accompany Jesus, doesn’t have any personal knowledge, no first-hand experience; nothing. Hence the word ‘chosen.’” Without saying so explicitly, Taubes touches upon the strange subjectivist-universalist dialectic in the act by which apostolic speech legitimates and institutes the very subject and communal context—the ecclesia—that will become its expression. How is this done?

According to Taubes, Paul adopts a “strategy of outbidding [Überbietungsstrategie]”—of outdoing and outwitting—Moses, just as the Sermon on the Mount is said to be typologically related to the giving of the Mosaic law. As throughout the New Testament, Taubes states, “All of salvation history is an imitation.” The origin of Christianity must therefore be found in Paul rather than in the life and works of Jesus, more specifically, in the “parallelism of Moses and Paul,” which is also a “polemical relationship, the way Paul measures himself up against Moses.” From here it is a small step from Taubes’s position to the one espoused by Marcion in his outright rejection of the Old Testament, along the lines laid out by Adolf von Harnack, to whose study Taubes refers approvingly in the second part of The Political Theology of Paul.

Taubes suggests that Paul even measures himself against Christ, in what he calls Paul’s anthropological, more precisely, “Feuerbachian” turn, culminating in the equivalence of the love of one’s neighbor with all other theist or soteriological claims in the Gospels. Of Romans 13 he notes:

This is a highly polemical text, polemical against Jesus. Because from the Gospels we know the dual commandment. Jesus is asked: What is the most important commandment? And he says, You shall love your Lord with all your strength and your soul
and your might, and after this follows: Love your neighbor as yourself. Paul doesn’t issue a dual commandment, but rather makes them equivocal; I almost want to say, following [Alexandre] Kojève, that he pulls a Feuerbach here. . . . I regard this as an absolutely revolutionary act.27

The quest for the historical Jesus—once a privileged preoccupation in New Testament scholarship, as witnessed by Albert Schweizer’s classic study—is the least of Taubes’s concerns. He focuses instead on the problem Paul and Moses share: that of the establishing or “founding a people [die Gründung eines Volkes].”28 This motivates Romans 9 through 13, which evoke a singular transfiguration of the old into the new, in which “the old ways and old things end up unclear [dass das alte in eine Verundeutlichung gerät].”29 Indeed, for all his mimicry of Moses, Paul is taking on a task that is “unprecedented and unique.”30

Taubes sees it as in part encapsulated, appropriated, and also distorted in the allegorical-typological medieval scene of Moses pouring grain into the hopper of Paul’s gospel—the “sum total of Christian experience”—which is explicated by the eleventh-century Abbot Suger of the abbey of St. Denis: “By the working of the mill, thou, Paul, takest the flour out of the bran./Thou makest known the inmost meaning of the Law of Moses./From so many grains is made the true bread without bran./Our and the angels’ perpetual food.”31

Taubes sees Paul against a Jewish background and disagrees strongly with Martin Buber’s attempt to set up a radical distinction between the Jewish experience of emunah and the supposedly Hellenistic-individualistic concept of faith as personal belief, or pists. Nonetheless, there is for Taubes an eminently philosophical point to Paul’s text that goes unnoticed in what he derisively calls the “humanistic-Humboldt-cultural idea,” codified in the “interpretatio graeca of European history.”32 Somewhat provocatively, he insists that departments of philosophy would be well advised to pay more attention to the Bible in general and to Paul in particular, since it is in his writings and in the Pauline corpus generally that certain systematic decisions are taken that anticipate much of the later debates in Western thought, including its paths not taken.

No Transitions

Taubes notes that in Paul’s writings “faith” should not be interpreted in a Protestant light—that is, in its “sense of an individual, ahistorical relation to God,”33 to quote his editors—but is instead reconstructed as “a paradoxical experience of salvation in the catastrophic dimension of history.”34 Likewise, the “theme of law is not related to Jewish law as the paradigm of fixation on the letter and self-righteousness, as Christian exegesis would have it,” but rather Paul’s critique of the law is, according to Taubes, “directed
against the Hellenistic theology of the sovereign.” Furthermore, Taubes undoes the Lutheran opposition in “faith not works” by distilling from Paul a distinct revolutionary and apocalyptic “political theology.” In other words, “Paul’s radical critique of law is assessed not as a Christian polemic against Judaism but as a Jewish potential for liberation, one in a series of Jewish forms of liberation from the law.” This sheds light not only on the guiding motifs of Romans but also on other epistles, such as the following passage from Galatians: “Therefore He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you, does He do it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?” (Gal. 3:5).

One way of undoing or at least relativizing the interpretatio graeca is to insist on the peculiar temporal logic—the paradoxical, antinomian temporal experience of the Galgenfrist (“reprieve”)—that Paul would have had in common with the messianic movements that preceded and followed him in the Jewish tradition as discussed by Scholem, with whom Taubes here agrees wholeheartedly: “Whoever understands what Scholem presents in the eight chapters of Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism can penetrate more deeply into Paul’s messianic logic than by reading the entire exegetical literature.” The logic in question repeats beyond the ancient and modern interpretatio judaica, reaching up to Benjamin’s “Theologico-Political Fragment.” As Taubes asserts, “Benjamin shares Scholem’s idea... that apocalyptics knows no transitions, but posits between the Now and the Then a time of catastrophe, a time of silence, a time of total destruction and annihilation.”

We can now understand why the phenomenological-hermeneutic or existential-dialectical approach is the type of appropriation from which Taubes seeks most to distance himself. While identifying with apocalyptically revolutionary thinkers such as Benjamin and Schmitt, he views with scorn all attempts, such as Heidegger’s or Bultmann’s, to formalize Paul’s view in fundamental-ontological terms. They seem to him to strip Paul’s message of what matters most to his own political-historical (and eminently ritual) reading. In a course description announcing his final seminar at Berlin, entitled “On the Political Theology of Paul: From Polis to Ecclesia,” Taubes states:

The Epistle to the Romans by the Apostle Paul has at decisive stations of the Christian era—Augustine, Luther, Karl Barth—inform the self-understanding of the Church and of Christendom. But all of these stations of exegesis were characterized primarily by an “existentialist” element. We will attempt to make out the “political” charge of Paul’s reflection. I read the Epistle to the Romans as a legitimation and formation of a new social union—covenant [(Ver)Bund], of the developing ecclesia against the Roman Empire, on the one hand, and, on the other, of the ethnic unity of the Jewish people.

Paul’s idea was thus that of a “political Christology,” a “political messianism,” or, in Taubes’s own words, a “negative political theology,” which consisted in the simultaneous delegitimation of the “ethnic community,” on the one hand, and the “Roman Imperial
order,” on the other. Paul’s originality, on this reading (a reading with which Alain Badiou largely agrees), consists in undoing all natural, cultural ties of *ethnos*, *nomos*, and *polis*. He is portrayed as denying the ultimate force of every law, thereby undoing the legitimacy of “all sovereigns of the world, be they imperial or theocratic.” In Benjamin’s “Theologico-Political Fragment,” Taubes claims, this is abundantly clear: “There is a Messiah. No shmontses like ‘the messianic,’ ‘the political,’ no neutralization, but the Messiah. We have to be clear about this. Not that we are dealing here with the Christian Messiah, but it does say: the Messiah. No cloudy Enlightenment or Romantic neutralization.” According to Taubes, there could be no better example of this “paradigm of a faith that suspends all natural ties” than the story of the sacrifice of Isaac as recounted by Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling*. All this must be understood against the backdrop of the shock of “the people of God no longer being the people of God,” of an “inner dialectic” (cf. Romans 9) that would bring in the gentiles “in order to make Israel jealous” and set in play an opposition between the “rest” and the “whole” of Israel. This dynamic should be distinguished from the paradigm Taubes discerns in Rosenzweig’s hypothesis, in *The Star of Redemption*, of the “two paths” of Judaism and Christianity, one outside and one within the realm of history.

Taubes’s thesis is that the concept of law—“and this again is political theology”—is nothing but a “compromise formula” for what was known as the “Imperium Romanum” and its “aura, that is to say, as “a general Hellenistic aura, an apotheosis of nomos.” The critique of the law, Taubes further surmises, is the fruit of Paul’s “dialogue” not merely with the Pharisees—“that is, with himself”—but “also with the Mediterranean world surrounding him.” Whereas most understood something different by the term law (the Torah, the law of the universe, cosmos, or nature, the hypostasis, as in Philo of Alexandria—the list goes on), Paul is only seemingly “of the same universality.” Taubes asserts that this simple fact has been overlooked by New Testament scholars such as Bultmann. Paul inhabits “nomos liberalism,” Taubes counters, only to wage a “totally illiberl” war against its principles and aims:

this is someone who answers the same thing in a completely different way, that is, with protest, with a transvaluation of all values: It isn’t *nomos* but rather the one who was nailed to the cross by *nomos* who is the imperator! This is incredible [unheimlich], and compared to this all the little revolutionaries simply nullities. This transvaluation stands Jewish-Roman-Hellenistic upper-class theology, the whole melting pot of *Mischmash* of Hellenism, on its head. Sure, Paul is also universal, but by virtue of the needle’s eye of the one who was crucified, which means: transvaluation of all the values of this world.

Indeed, Taubes goes on to note, “what Nietzsche discovered in Paul, the genius of the transvaluation of values [Umwertung der Werte], is contained precisely in the critique of
the concept of law.”51 “Israel” comes to stand for a “community of solidarity [Solidaritätsgemeinschaft],” no longer based on “blood kinship [or consanguinity, Blutgemeinschaft]” but related only by a promise, by a “kinship of promise [Verheissungsverwandtschaft].”52 And, as we hear a little later, “‘all’ according to the flesh is not identical to ‘all’ according to the promise,”53 according not to a past promise now suddenly realized, but to a promise held out for the immediate, imminent future, as well.

Hence the curious mixture of eschatological-apocalyptic revolutionary spirit and seemingly “nihilistic” quietism expressed in the positive (and not merely negative-aesthetic, that is, Adornian) ἀσιίς με, the “to have as if one doesn’t have” of which the First Letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 7:29ff., but also, in Taubes’s interpretation, Rom. 13:11ff.) makes so much.54 Pleased with what he sees, Taubes exclaims: “now here comes a subterranean society, a little bit Jewish, a little bit Gentile, nobody knows, what sort of lowlifes are these anyway.”55

Yet the end of consanguinity takes place only through the expiation of the blood of one. The people of Israel, while now a remnant, will become pan, a totality, a potentially universalist whole. But the exclusivist-inclusivist dynamic is more complex, as is clear from Romans 5:8–10:

God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we are now justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.

Or, again, in Romans 5:18–21:

as one man’s trespass [namely, Adam’s, “who was a type of the one who was to come”; Rom. 5:14] led to condemnation for all men, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men. For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man’s obedience many will be made righteous. Law came in, to increase the trespass; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

In consequence, Paul writes, “sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under the law but under grace” (Rom. 6:14). We are dealing, then, with a “universalism” that is identified with the “election of Israel,” first with the “rest,” then with the “whole (or all)” of Israel, following a schema according to which virtually or almost everything and everyone is condemned yet virtually or almost all are—or will be—saved: “Only that
Israel is now being transfigured and then in the end it says pas Israel,”’ which the whole or all of Israel, “the establishment and legitimation of a new people of God.”

It is hard to spell out what “transfiguration” and “universalism” by way of singularity might mean. Yet it is clear that Taubes sees in Paul the “most dramatic process that one can imagine in a Jewish soul,” not least because its basis is the “orge theou, the wrath of God wanting to annihilate the people because it has sinned, because it has become unfaithful,” in an uncanny dialectic of election and rejection, which sets up the grand scheme for the later interpretation of predestination and justification through belief, more precisely, the righteousness of faith.

This “logic of pneumatics” escapes human categories of distributive justice and fairness and remains, in Paul’s own terms, a “mystery,” of sorts. As Taubes observes:

“And he hardened Pharaoh’s heart.” He, God. In other words, things aren’t happening according to enlightened philanthropy.

From this example, which completely escapes from ethics—for these aren’t deeds, works, but elections!—it goes on.

This structure of near-total rejection by way of (and in response to) Israel’s and the gentiles’ hardening of hearts and universal redemption through saving grace alone forms the matrix between whose extremes Paul’s theology of providential history (in partial resonance with contemporary views, such as those of Flavius Josephus) is stretched out.

To the extent, further, that Romans dwells on the promise to Abraham—“I have made you the father of many nations”—as well as on Abraham’s faith against all odds (“In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations”; Gen. 17:5) one can read Paul against the backdrop of Kierkegaard’s treatment, in Fear and Trembling, of the sacrifice of Isaac and the horror religiosus (Kierkegaard’s term) that it inspires. As Taubes insists, “the evening of Yom Kippur is in the grip of this trembling,” just as for Paul, in a “curious mixture of allegoresis and typology,” conjoining prehistory and present history, the “binding of Isaac is the prelude to the crucifixion.” On the whole, Paul’s logic seems configured as “the repetition of a primal scene [Urszene].”

The “Super-Rabbi” Who Played a Risky Apocalyptic Game

Called a “Super-Rabbi [Wunderrebbe]” by some, a charlatan by others, Taubes engages in extensive and at times hyperbolic religious phrasing, whose logic and rhetoric of theological exaggeration and exasperation forces sweeping statements to go hand in hand with the effective exhaustion (of saying everything and nothing at once). The political theology of Paul, as Taubes reads him, is a risky apocalyptic game (a Vabanque or va banque, i.e., “hit the bank”) that remains instructive as a pragmatic model, though it risks overstatement and understatement at once.
It is not by chance that the philosophical renaissance of interest in Paul coincides with the return of a certain specter of Marxism (as, e.g., in Badiou or David Graeber), as well as of Capital, to dominate the geo-political scene. We are witnessing various forms of direct democratic action—revolts, revolutions, popular insurgencies, national uprisings, civil disobedience—that elude modern forms of parliamentary representation and ideological affiliation. The impossible turns out, surprisingly, to be possible, as civil courage and acts of heroism lead to events that seem nothing short of the working of miracles. It is in this context that the writings of Paul seem newly relevant for philosophy and philosophers.

The current interest in the idea of “communism”—albeit reconceived beyond the doctrines that inaugurated its dismal historical failures—as well as new senses given to “community” or communitas and the “common” (independent of any state’s, party’s, or group’s ambition to monopolize power), together with the surprising efficacy of political, economic, and cultural resistance (Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, etc.) in places where they had long seemed least likely to appear or to succeed, hint at experiments and energies that had not been anticipated by European traditions of social democracy or Anglo-American versions of political liberalism. These new movements seem unlike the all but forgotten legacies of religious socialism in Europe and the Social Gospel in the United States, not to mention anarchism, radical democracy, and the single-issue social protest movements of so-called identity politics, which had their historical moment. Messianism and apocalypticism, together with the theologico-political interpretations for which they continue to call, stand as alternative historical and political paradigms, drawing on an archive that reaches back and out—vertically and laterally, as it were—thus offering a dimension of perspectival depth and metaphysical weight to our most pragmatic and down-to-earth preoccupations.

The importance of Taubes’s The Political Theology of Paul is that it looks back on and, as it were, calls out to forms of political agency and their intellectual justification (or lack thereof) that for too long have been ignored as viable alternatives to the teleologies and projects that have dominated Europe since the Enlightenment. In other words, Taubes imagines chances that have continuously been offered, if rarely taken: “Paul’s God plays dice [Würfel],” Taubes writes, varying and parodying Einstein’s bon mot. But what does that mean?

On Actualizing Interpretation: Taubes With and Against Barth

Taubes’s attempts systematically to modify and reorient our understanding of Paul turn out, on closer examination, to be surprisingly reminiscent of Barth’s exegetical and hermeneutic strategies. Both perform moves that are historicist and anti-historicist at once. Take this statement, from the 1918 preface to the first edition of Barth’s Epistle to the Romans:
Paul, as a child of his age, addressed his contemporaries. It is, however, far more important that, as Prophet and Apostle of the Kingdom of God, he veritably speaks to all men of every age. The differences between then and now, there and here, no doubt require careful investigation and consideration. But the purpose of such investigation can only be to demonstrate that these differences are, in essence, meaningless. . . . my whole energy of interpreting has been expended in an endeavor to see through and beyond history into the spirit of the Bible, which is the Eternal Spirit. What was once of grave importance, is so still. What is today of grave importance—and not merely crotchety and incidental—stands in direct connection with that ancient gravity. If we rightly understand ourselves, our problems are the problems of Paul; and if we be enlightened by the brightness of his answers, those answers must be ours.

Long, long ago the Truth was found,
A company of noble minds it has bound.
Grasp firmly then—that ancient Truth

The understanding of history is an uninterrupted and increasingly sincere and intense conversation between the wisdom of yesterday and the wisdom of tomorrow, which is one and the same.\textsuperscript{65}

Barth’s exegesis of \textit{Romans} at once frees the apostle’s testimony from the stifling cultural conformism and moralistic complacency of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Protestant liberalism in Germany, maintains a link to Barth’s own contemporary moment, and is aware of the differences between historical periods. I refer to such a stance as “actualizing interpretation,” meaning exegesis that makes an idea real, actual, for a writer’s contemporary situation, while not losing perspective on the gaps between that moment and other historical times. In the words of Jacques Derrida’s final interview, this is the need to find oneself to be “the ‘anachronistic’ contemporary of a past or future generation.”\textsuperscript{67}

Both Barth’s and Taubes’s readings express an intellectual and political climate of multigenerational “crisis,” reflecting, in Barth’s case, the generation that had witnessed the Great War and the onset of internal strife in the young Weimar Republic and, for them both, the sense of hopelessness and political doom in the period after World War II, in the aftermath of the Shoah and in the midst of the emerging Cold War and the pretenses at reparation. The sense of the “negative [\textit{das Nichtige}]” in Barth’s later writing leaves nothing to be imagined in this regard.\textsuperscript{68}

To put actualizing interpretation into practice, however, we must see Barth’s and Taubes’s interpretations as both bearing historical weight as documents marked by their time and being our contemporaries, as still speaking directly to us. For the theological
and critical tasks they set themselves in their readings of Paul have lost nothing of their pertinence and urgency. Hence, their tasks must continue to inform present-day discussions of Paul’s engagement with—and ultimate disengagement from—the themes, methods, and discipline of philosophy and the general Hellenistic culture, including its political ramifications. Taubes and Barth, like Paul (in Barth’s words), thus speak “to all men of every age” and, while undeniable “differences between then and now, there and here, no doubt require careful investigation and consideration,” these necessary nuances do not cancel out their actualizing relevance. Barth is right, therefore: “the purpose of such investigation can only be to demonstrate that these differences are, in essence, meaningless.”

This insight lays the foundation for Barth’s later claim, in the opening pages to his Church Dogmatics, that the academic field of Church history is not “an independent theological discipline,” strictly speaking, but merely “an auxiliary,” if “indispensable,” scholarly tool for the more stringent inquiries of exegetical, dogmatic, and practical theology proper.79 The unmistakable historical and cultural differences between authors do not relegate the philosophical question of their possible or eventual agreement, commonality, and common cause to a secondary plane, nor do they render such inquiry pointless or obsolete.

“Zealots of the absolute and of decision”

Part of the charm of Taubes’s book is the witty way in which he characterizes intellectual constellations in the reception of Paul’s epistles.71 Especially striking is his brief portrait of Karl Barth and Carl Schmitt—strange bedfellows—as “two zealots of the absolute and of decision,” though one also savors his references to the writing of Benjamin and Adorno as “nihilism as world politics” and “aestheticized messianism,” respectively. In both cases there is no doubt where Taubes’s sympathies lie. Schmitt and his antipode Benjamin are undeniably the heroes of his seminar on Paul and, indeed, most of his earlier writings. Taubes sees them as addressing the motif and motivation of “Pauline enmity [Paulinische Feindschaft],” which Tremel rightly identifies as the center of his own preoccupation, together with the “universalization of gnosis,”72 or, more specifically, of “political Marcionism.”73

Barth and Adorno, by contrast, serve him as negative examples to profile apocalypticism “from the top down,” which he attributes to Schmitt, and to contrast all three to Benjamin’s apocalypticism “from the bottom up.” Barth and Adorno point to a path that is treacherously near the one to be taken, but their work remains, for him, a travesty of the true task of thinking and acting. By contrast, Taubes feels that the apocalypticism offered by Schmitt and Benjamin, though from opposite ends of the political spectrum, exhibits an iron logic that he took to be the sign of genuine thought and political practice.
To be a “zealot” of the “absolute” and of “decision” in its most uncompromising expression results in the “nihilism” whose global political maxim—that is, whose dramatic out-and-overreach as “world politics”—Taubes, in his strange amalgamation of a latter-day Super-Rabbi and Marcionite, ferociously advocates.

In a resolutely liturgical reading—a meditation and spiritual exercise sui generis, as it were—Taubes thus stresses the antinomian liberalism of Paul and his true heirs. He takes this to be the real (and politically realistic) matrix of all later revolutionary engagement, including those that punctuated his own days: namely, 1968 and the other student movements of the late sixties, the protests against the Vietnam War, Latin American liberation theologies, and postcolonial struggles. By contrast, all “aestheticized” interpretations of Paul’s gospel strip away what is left of its “weak messianic power,” in the words of Benjamin’s “Theses on History,” echoing Luther’s translation of 2 Corinthians 12:9–10. Taubes knows its force is to invert—that is, to turn upside down and overthrow—the powers that be, thus rendering all that exists virtually nil, while bringing into existence what had seemed never quite to be there.

Agamben aptly describes this as:

the intransigent messianic principle articulated firmly by the apostle, in which those things that are weak and insignificant will, in the days of the Messiah, prevail over those things the world considers to be strong and important (1 Cor. 1:27–28: “But God hath chosen . . . the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty, . . . and things which are not, to bring to nought the things that are”).

Furthermore, Agamben concludes that Taubes was the only scholar to note the possible influence of Paul on Benjamin, but his hypothesis referred to a text from the 1920s, the Theologico-Political Fragment, which he connected to Romans 8:19–23. Taubes’s intuition is certainly on the mark; nevertheless, in that particular instance it is not only impossible to speak of citations (except perhaps in the case of Benjamin’s term Vergängnis, “caducity,” which could correspond to the Lutheran translation of verse 21, vergängliches Wesen), but there are also substantial differences between the two texts. While, for Paul, creation is unwillingly subjected to caducity and destruction and for this reason groans and suffers while awaiting redemption, for Benjamin, who reverses this in an ingenious way, nature is messianic precisely because of its eternal and complete caducity.

How could Taubes have so entangled and amalgamated Schmitt and Barth in what was to be his last word on the question of political theology? Conversely, how could he have separated so violently the names and projects of Benjamin and Adorno—or, at the least, “nihilism” and “aestheticism”—given that these authors formed an integral part of
the same intellectual configuration, that of early Frankfurt School Critical Theory? Is he right to suggest that the differences between Schmitt and Barth, both avid and partisan readers of Paul's Epistle to the Romans, are, from a messianic and apocalyptic political viewpoint, not really that telling? Similarly, are the differences between Benjamin and Adorno—who refer to Paul quite obliquely—perhaps not as important as Taubes claims? To complicate matters even more, do these respective pairings of thinkers not also, in their turn, secretly and inadvertently shade (and cross over) into one another; and, if they do, what consequences might that have? Do they, on Taubes's reading, not only partially overlap but become virtually exchangeable, so that we contemporary readers can no longer discern on criteriological (i.e., epistemological, exegetical, hermeneutical, or otherwise normative grounds) which is which? If so, is this not precisely the fear and trembling, the woe and wonder in which the theological crisis, together with the no less urgent need to decide—to call things by their name and be called out by them in turn—puts us at any given moment, no matter what the concrete historical circumstances would seem to dictate, requiring us to submit to a judgment, a moment and momentum, whose arrival and outcome we cannot control?

This interchangeability should inspire us to revise our understanding of twentieth-century religious thought. Both “progressive” and “conservative” movements have taken forms whose contours are deceptively similar, even as their doctrinal content and political impetus remain opposed. We need an alternative optics—what I will develop below as a “dual aspect seeing”—to register and explain the oscillation of reactionary and revolutionary moments, movements, motifs, and motivations. In them, religion—and, a fortiori, political theologies—is revealed to be a complexly dual, Janus-faced phenomenon. Under the pressure of global commerce and communication, new markets and media, this “global religion” has been expanding dramatically.

To give an example of this interchangeability, Taubes remarks that Benjamin's “Theological-Political Fragment” should be seen “from the point of view” of the second, 1922 edition of Barth's commentary on the Epistle to the Romans. From this angle, Taubes goes on to say, Benjamin's aphorism reveals itself to be a “dialectical theology outside the Christian Church,” that is to say, not so much “dogmatics and so on” but the original “dialectical theology of 1920 . . . in its very first phase in lay-theologese.” He thus takes Benjamin's text to be reminiscent of the radically modern effort, under the name “dialectical theology,” to expunge from theology as a project, a discipline, or a Wissenschaft all philosophical, natural, historical, and cultural presuppositions. (In this, Barth was more rigorous, relentless, expansive, and daring than many of his fellow travelers, among them Eduard Thurneysen, Friedrich Gogarten, Emil Brunner, Rudolf Bultmann, and Paul Tillich.)

Taubes thus praises Benjamin for having “a hardness similar to that of Barth” and adds that, just as in the latter's commentary on Romans, so in the “Theological-Political Fragment” there is:
nothing there having to do with immanence. From that one gets nowhere. The drawbridge comes from the other side. And whether you get fetched or not, as Kafka describes it, is not up to you. One can take the elevators up to the high-rises of spirituality—it won’t help. Hence the clear break. You can’t get anything out of it. You have to be told from the other side that you’re liberated.  

By contrast, he ridicules Adorno for treating redemption as a “comme si affair,” that is to say, as a fictionalist-aesthetic “as if.” This is not to say that Adorno thinks of redemption in terms of a religious a priori, as Neo-Kantians such as Hermann Cohen and Hans Vaihinger had proposed. Rather, Taubes sees in Adorno’s more cautious and hesitant stance merely a softening and flattening out of the harder, deeper, and more daring Pauline perspective taken by Benjamin and Barth.

**Nihilism, Marcionism?**

Paul’s invocation in First Corinthians (1 Cor. 7:29 ff.) of the ἄνεος μὴ, the as if not, the injunction to have one’s possessions and place in the world as if one does not have them, is, Taubes assumes, a fundamentally “nihilistic” operation. This New Testament invocation finds one of its strongest echoes in the excommunicated second-century bishop Marcion of Sineope’s “Gospel of the Alien God,” reconstructed by Adolf von Harnack in 1921. Taubes writes of

Marcion’s very first sentence in the book that we don’t have, but that is reconstructed by Harnack out of various sources. Here the gospel is understood as gift and is introduced as follows: “O what wonder upon wonder, what amazement, and overpowering astonishment it is, that people who have not a thing to say about the gospel, that they do not think about it, nor that it can be compared with anything at all.” That is, certainly, not with anything of this world. It is alien. The alien God—an expression of Marcion’s deus alienus—meets with something equally alien in us.

For Marcion, this alien God is not the Creator God of Hebrew Scripture. He writes: “O what wonder of all wonders [Wunder aller Wunder] that in spite of this world . . . there is redemption.”

In his discussion of Marcion, Taubes is after a certain messianic and apocalyptic or “nihilistic” logic he believes Marcion and Paul shared: “It not a question of showing, pedantically, where Marcion diverges from Paul; that’s easily done. The question is where he does capture an intention—and he does take himself to be Paul’s true disciple.” Harnack too finds Marcion to be one of the “most significant phenomena in church history between Paul and Augustine.” He writes:
Marcion affords us the key for unlocking a number of the difficult problems that are presented by the transition of the church from the postapostolic to the old Catholic period. Here one can dismiss every individual Gnostic without loss, but we cannot omit Marcion if we wish to understand the dynamic development, indeed the metamorphosis, that occurs in the time of that transition—not only because Catholicism is constructed as a defense against Marcion but, in a still higher degree, because it appropriated from this heretic something fundamental.

Still greater is Marcion's hitherto sadly neglected significance in the general history of religion, for he is the only thinker in Christianity who took fully seriously the conviction that the Deity who redeems one from the world has absolutely nothing to do with cosmology and cosmic theology. The new life of faith and freedom was for him something so “alien” as over against the world that he based its emergence upon the same doubtful/daring hypothesis by which Helmholtz proposed to explain the emergence of organisms on the earth.”

Taubes takes von Harnack's intuition one step further, bluntly noting that "Creation has no role in the New Testament." On the contrary, he adds, there is "only one thing there: redemption," and the "thread that links creation and redemption is a very thin one. A very, very thin one. And it can snap. And that is Marcion." Indeed, Taubes writes: "I see Benjamin as the exegete of the 'nature' of Romans 8, of decay, and of Romans 13, nihilism as world politics." His characterization of Benjamin as "a modern Marcionite" situates this Marxist-Messianic author's theologicopolitical view squarely within the context of Jewish messianism, in all of its apocalyptic, theocratic, dialectical, and revolutionary democratic aspects.

On Taubes's account, the only way out of the predicament of both nature and empire, of creation and the second nature of the sociocultural normative order, would be nothing short of a wager and a miracle—a terrifying gamble and throw of the dice, the fatality of divine providence and predetermination no less than a stroke of good luck—that would defy scientific laws and the logics of probability and untie the age-old knot between determining causes and their proportionate effects. Taubes inscribes a necessary contingency in the very heart of the divine (of the God of love, the "other" or "alien" God, who unjustifiably, by any standard—chooses or elects to acknowledge (i.e., save) only some, while avoiding (i.e., affronting and immobilizing) most others: "Paul's God plays dice. He elects and condemns. In the Calvinist form this is a game of dice. One is born to election and born to damnation. . . . And we—just as the pot can't ask the potter—can't ask why he created us this way." He goes on to say: "it's a different matter whether one decides, in whatever way, to understand the cosmos as immanent and governed by laws,
or whether one thinks the miracle is possible, the exception. . . . The question is whether you think the exception is possible—and it is on the exception, after all, that the whole law of natural science runs aground, because natural science is based on prognosis. 91

The wager and the miracle, the divine throw of the dice, escape our understanding and experience of causality and finality, probability and randomness, relation and correlation, the analogy of being (analogia entis) and, perhaps, even the analogy of faith (analogia fidei, cf. Rom. 12:6). In fact, there is nothing quite like it; its “effect” is “special” in the most emphatic, the most paradoxical and aporetic of ways. Put differently, the concept of miracle stands here for the fact that “God” and “faith”—that is, the Messiah’s arrival, resurrection, and all the rest—condemn the premises and organizing concepts of natural and dogmatic theology. Moreover, its improbable and, strictly speaking, impossible possibility similarly challenges the coherence of the theism underlying biblical, ecclesial, dogmatic, and mystical theology. But, especially in the writings of Barth, even such theology knows that it stands condemned and assumes the negative: the nullity of its affirmations, including that of the “positivity,” let alone “positivism,” of its concept of revelation—the “positivism of revelation” (Offenbarungspositivismus)—to which it, also in its dialectical reorientation, was so often and so falsely reduced.

As Barth, following Harnack, notes in the preface to the second edition of The Epistle to the Romans: “Paulinism has stood always on the brink of heresy.” Yet, Barth continues, we should “reflect whether the persistent covering up of the dangerous element in Christianity is not to hide its light under a bushel. Perhaps Spengler was right when he told us that we were entering upon an ‘iron age.’ If this be so, theology and the theologians are bound to bear the marks of it.”

What then, is this “dangerous element”? And how does Barth succeed in keeping at bay some of its strongest historical and contemporary interpretations, such as those proposed by Marcion or by the radical Reformer Thomas Münzer, instigator of the violent farmer’s revolts in sixteenth-century Germany, whom Ernst Bloch reads as a “theologian of the revolution”? After all, it was to both of these figures that the author of the theological commentary with the dry, inexpressive title The Epistle to the Romans was quickly compared by detractors and sympathizers alike.

As Barth notes:

Harnack’s book on Marcion appeared whilst I was immersed in the writing of my commentary. Those who are familiar with both books will understand why I am bound to refer to it. I was puzzled, on reading the earlier review of Harnack’s book, by the remarkable parallels between what Marcion had said and what I was actually writing. I wish to plead for a careful examination of these agreements before I be praised or blamed hastily as though I were a Marcionite. At the crucial points these agreements break down. 93
What are these crucial points in which Barth’s Paul and Harnack’s Marcion seem to converge, intersect, overlap, and touch upon each other—tangentially, as it were—if only to depart in altogether different directions, as the apparent agreement breaks down? The most likely candidate is reference to the “nothing [Nichts]” to which the New Testament reduces the powers that be (whether the power of nature and of the cosmos, political hegemony, or the forces of the flesh and of sin). The order of fallen creation and of the Creator-God is thereby exposed to crisis, as in Barth’s early dialectical theology.84

Another candidate is insistence on the paradoxical nature of redemption in Christ (and nowhere else). This effects a second crisis within Christianity. In Marcion’s case (in the years 150–90 C.E., as Harnack reconstructs them), this crisis is the single most important religious, theological, and, perhaps, messianic event between the conversion of Paul and the confession of Augustine, as we have seen. The depth of this crisis resembles the later declarations of Martin Luther, although Marcion’s gospel constituted a more radical challenge of the Church than would be represented by the Reformation, even in its most quasi-apocalyptic, antinomian, and politically revolutionary manifestations.85

Indeed, in his dissertation Harnack had already identified Marcion as the “modern believer of the second century, the first reformer,” indeed, as a “radical modernist,” whose actuality could be seen in the widely felt need to refuse both syncretism and compromise.86 That said, however, the difference between von Harnack’s and Barth’s views of Marcion’s place in the history of the Church is mirrored in the unbridgeable distance between their conceptions of the essence of Christianity and the task of Religionswissenschaft, steeped in the nineteenth-century liberal and high-cultured Protestantism (the cultural syndrome of bourgeois and moralistic complacency known as Kulturprotestantismus) that bore von Harnack’s signature and in dogmatic-biblical theology—eventually, a “critically realistic” Church Dogmatics—that would become Barth’s resolutely radical response to it.87 The fundamental contrast between the two projects became publicly manifest in the official break between the two when von Harnack, like most of the teachers of Barth’s generation, sided with the belligerent policies of Kaiser Wilhelm at the outbreak of the First World War, provoking the need for a new start and reorientation among those who were to come after them.

“A trans-theistic stage of consciousness”: Paradoxical Faith, Contradicted by the Evidence

On Taubes’s account, Barth’s dialectical theology is a modern expression of “messianic logic,” that is to say, of the view that “the internal logic of events” requires “a faith that is paradoxical, that is contradicted by the evidence.”88 Aside from a few references in passing in Occidental Eschatology, this diagnosis is elaborated in two essays (published in the American Journal of Theology in 1954 and included in 1996 in From Cult to Culture)
entitled “Dialectic and Analogy” and “Theodicy and Theology: A Philosophical Analysis of Karl Barth’s Dialectical Theology,” as well as in a brief review in *Commentary* under the title “Christian Nihilism.” In them, Taubes asserts that Barth’s theology, at least in the period of the 1922 edition of *The Epistle to the Romans*, subverts Scholastic philosophy, with its *theologia naturalis* (natural theology), based upon the principle of *analogia entis* and the “double bookkeeping” of a *duplex ordo* in which the infinite realm of the *ens increatum* (i.e., God) and the finite domain of the *ens creatum* (i.e., nature and humans) harmonize and cohere with each other as unequal parts of a single whole. Barth replaces the presumed hierarchical order of things and the chain of being with an altogether different model. In Taubes’s terms:

As a theology of co-contemporaneousness [*Aktualismus*], dialectical theology contradicts Thomistic philosophy and theology on the basic notion of being. The symbols of creation, sin, and redemption are not interpreted in the pattern of natural-supernatural, but in a temporal (transhistorical) scheme. Its categories are not the unfolding of the nature of things, but the unfolding of a sequence of events [*Ereignisse*]. Only such an ontological philosophy would be adequate to express a basic schema [*Grundschema*] of dialectical theology that could develop the temporal structure of its categories. Bergson’s or Heidegger’s anti-Aristotelian philosophy may provide the epistemological and ontological foundation of Barth’s historical categories—as a kind of “eventlessness [*Ereignislosigkeit*].”

Despite this suggestive comparison, Barth’s theological universe seems eons removed from the philosophies of Bergson and Heidegger (who are, in different ways, neither anti-Aristotelian nor quite on the same page with Barth on much else). Nor does Barth’s thought strike one as being based on a “basic notion of being” (unless one claims that every thought, including all theology, must be, *quod non*). Moreover, if “updating” (i.e., *aktualisieren*) is really the term one wants to invoke, then it is hard to see how this would sit well with either “basic schema” or “eventlessness.”

That said, Taubes is right to comment that Barth may well have written a “new chapter in the history of dialectics,” that is to say, in the history of method and ontology that, as Heidegger claims in *Being and Time*, Aristotle had already successfully overcome in its Platonic variety (and that Heidegger would come to dismiss in its Hegelian expansion). Barth, Taubes goes on to note, offers a theology without theodicy, thus opening the possibility of a religious language in an age of the eclipse of the divine. The language of dialectical theology seems able even to absorb the atheism of Nietzsche and [Franz] Overbeck as stages in the purification of man’s image of God and could accept the realm of necessity as a veil of the divine. Karl Barth opened a gate to a *trans-theistic* stage of consciousness, but he opened the gate to this stage as a theologian.
Taubes quickly gives in to the temptation to read these general statements as a specimen, not just of political theology (as he claims throughout), but of “political Marcionism”—a “political demonology”\textsuperscript{103} premised on the “doctrine of an alien God,” as von Harnack had interpreted the early Christian heresy. In Barth’s and Taubes’s hands, “political Marcionism” would thus seem to undermine the cultural and moral complacency of liberal Protestantism and hence to anticipate the crisis out of which Barth’s dialectical theology, as well as the theological ruminations of Friedrich Gogarten, Emil Brunner, Rudolf Bultmann, and Paul Tillich would emerge.\textsuperscript{104}

Yet dialectical theology—like “inverse” or “other theology,” to invoke the terminology of Adorno and Benjamin—engages the order and the powers that be, including the events that inevitably come to interrupt them, in ways that are more hesitant and paradoxical than the dualisms of Marcionism, together with “antinomianism” of all stripes (“antinomianism” being one of Taubes’s favorite notions). An altogether different explanatory model, an alternative “messianic logic,” if you like, seems to be called for.

Instead of ontological dualism, what is in play here is an ontological-theological prioritization, an inverted hierarchy, as it were, a novel optics of aspects of absolute as opposed to merely relative values, from whose perspective all things can be seen and set right (creation and revelation, history and its fall, messianic redemption and the restitution of all in all, the \textit{restitutio in integrum}, in which the “origin”—call it the paradisiacal state and adamitic language—is, once again, the “goal”).

Taubes summarizes things aptly when he sides with Barth (and with Benjamin and Kafka) against Adorno, whom he—somewhat unfairly—accuses of reducing messianic optics to a mere “idea” and, eventually, to a purely aesthetic “as if”: “if God is God, then he can’t be coaxed out \textit{herauszukitzeln} of our soul. There is a \textit{prius} there, an apriori. Something has to happen from the other side; then we see, when our eyes are pierced open. Otherwise we see nothing. Otherwise we ascend, we strive until the day after tomorrow.”\textsuperscript{105}

To put things differently and apodictically, adopting a formulation used by Bruce McCormack, one that strives to undermine all “fictionalism,” every reduction of redemption to the “as if”: if God is God, then He must be “not a possible God but the God who is.”\textsuperscript{106} Neither an anathetic God who “may be” nor a speculative materialist “inexistent” and “virtual” God who must still be produced, but a “critically realistic”—and, in that sense, dialectical—conception of God Who Is What He Is and Will Be.

A crucial question remains: After all, is what we call “God” God? Is the phrase “if God is God,” as Taubes uses it here, anything more than an empty, near-formal tautology, whose formulation and formalization—“if A, then A” or “A = A”—can yield no content or meaning or force worthy of the name (of the Divine Name, that is)?

Barth’s probing meditation on Anselm’s “ontological argument” for the existence of God, published in 1931 under the title \textit{Fides Quaerens Intellectum} and often described as
Barth’s discourse on method, offers a tentative response to these questions. Interestingly—otherwise than as Taubes suspects—Adorno’s own dictum that all philosophy revolves around our understanding and giving of the ontological proof for the existence of God (after Kant had seemed to destroy it) is another.

The Other Theology Versus the Theology of the Wholly Other

In the remainder of this essay, I will venture a hypothesis regarding Barth and Adorno, helped by the concept, or rather, the enigmatic formula of “inverse theology.” Adorno first uses it in his correspondence with Benjamin, with reference to the reception of Kafka. Later, however, he gives it much broader relevance in conversations with Max Horkheimer, speaking of “the other theology [die andere Theologie]” more abstractly. I believe that the latter, broader use of the idea of an “other theology,” which implicitly includes and cannot be understood without the earlier motif of an “inverse theology,” is quite pressing for us today. In the final chapter of my Minimal Theologies, I offer a first attempt to sketch this “other theology,” suggesting that the critique of “idolatry,” in all of its material and conceptual forms, might offer such matrix. In what follows, I will expand on this previous analysis.

Two reasons, at least, undergird the need for this expanded discussion. The first is that in Adorno’s earliest formulation the contrast between the idea of “inverse” or “other” theology and the competing concept of “dialectical theology” is not at all clear. We will need to examine just how Adorno’s idea of an “inverse” or “other theology” relates to the need for “a wholly other’ theological foundation” that Edward Thurneysen had suggested to Barth in their weekly correspondence, when they were pastors in adjacent villages and about to initiate a revolution in Protestant thought. How can one differentiate between “the other theology” and the theology of “the wholly other,” given that their respective “object” or “subject” is absolute, indeed, the Absolute, and hence absolves itself from every conceptual determination, divine nomination, image, or picture? Indeed, any attempt to fix it in a concept or representation risks blasphemy and idolatry, as it reaches beyond the tangential and infinitesimal point at which the two theologies touch, if only fleetingly and often vainly.

The second reason is that the semantic and political force of the concept of the “other theology” was limited and all but lost in one of its most influential expressions, Horkheimer’s “Longing for the Totally Other,” the title of a 1970 interview with Der Spiegel. I will ask what, by drawing Adorno’s formulation away from Horkheimer and toward Barth, we might retrieve for the concept of “inverse theology” today.
Against Natural and Supernatural Interpretation

What, today, is not “theology” (apart from theological chatter [Geschwätz])? Is E. Jünger less “theology” than Bultmann or Brunner? Kafka less than Karl Barth?

—Jacob Taubes, Ad Carl Schmitt

The term inverse theology appears in a letter from Adorno to Benjamin dated December 17, 1934. In it, Adorno reports on his reading of Kafka, later more elaborately documented in “Notes on Kafka.” In the later text we find the most extensive indications of Adorno’s conception of an “inverse” theology. For all we know, Adorno suggests, “inverse theology,” as opposed to “straight” or “dialectical” theology, may call for the representation of something altogether different and unheard of, something not of this world yet not otherworldly. The concept had long been in preparation in Adorno’s writing, however, and it casts a long shadow well beyond the essay on Kafka. We find echoes of “inverse theology” in the essays on Schönberg’s Moses and Aaron, on Beckett’s Endgame, and in Metaphysics, the series of lecture courses leading up to the publication of Adorno’s magnum opus, Negative Dialectics, in 1966.

In the correspondence with Benjamin and in “Notes on Kafka,” Adorno contests a certain theological interpretation of Kafka’s œuvre that would ascribe to him a “religious position,” perhaps even “the religious archi-position as such [die religiöse Urposition schlechtin].” Here Adorno takes issue less with Barth (or, as one might have expected, Max Brod, who was the main proponent of the Jewish-theological interpretation of Kafka, whose literary legacy had been entrusted to him) than with Hans-Joachim Schoeps. He mentions Barth and Brod in passing but saves his ire for Schoeps’s appropriation of what Adorno calls “dialectical theology” to interpret Kafka in terms of a “Barthianism without mediator [Barthianismus ohne Mittler],” that is to say, without Christ (or any other intermediary instance or connecting instant) to bridge heaven and earth. Schoeps had also been a target of ridicule in the correspondence between Benjamin and Scholem in the spring of 1933, both with regard to alleged dilettantism in his interpretation of Kafka and also in view of his conservative, nationalist Prussian political sympathies (whose National-Socialist implications Schoeps—who went into exile in Sweden and lost family members in Theresienstadt and Auschwitz—would vehemently deny, both in correspondence with Brod and in an unpublished riposte to the publication of the Benjamin-Scholem letters).

Schoeps had sent his 1931 Jewish Faith in Our Time: Prolegomena to the Foundation of a Systematic Theology of Judaism to Barth and had met him in person; a correspondence in which Barth responded critically to Schoeps’s theses followed roughly a year later. In fact, Schoeps is somewhat apologetic about his choice of words in characterizing Kafka as
“Barthianism without mediator [or mediators, since Mittler is the same in singular and plural].” He writes: “If we want to typify Kafka’s worldview, then it is—sit venia verbo [“if you will pardon the phrase”—a Barthianism without mediator. Not only the path from earth to heaven, but also the one from heaven to earth is too long, ever to be followed.”

Adorno’s reservations about dialectical theology, then, seem aimed less at Barth directly (though he takes issue elsewhere, unconvincingly, with Barth’s theology of the “wholly other”) than at the announcement, in the afterword to Kafka’s The Great Wall of China, published by Schoeps and Brod in 1931, that in a forthcoming book Schoeps would seek “to present a detailed interpretation of Franz Kafka’s entire work as ultimately expressing a negative actualization [negative Aktualisierung] of the Judaic understanding of revelation, and one conditioned by the advancing process of secularization.” The phrase “negative actualization” is deeply puzzling, indeed, downright paradoxical. After all, is a “negative actualization” not precisely an active, pro-active or retro-active de-actualization, of sorts? Or is a “negative actualization” of the Judaic understanding of revelation a de facto Christian understanding of that revelation, brought about by “the advancing process of secularization”? By implication, is secularization not yet a fully actualized phenomenon, but merely an “advancing process,” one that might well be forever ongoing? Such suggestions, I suspect, especially the suspicion of a creeping Christianization, may have spurred Scholem to write the open letter to Schoeps in which he categorically but politely rejects this author’s position in Jewish Faith in Our Time and protests against his abundant and uncritical use of “Protestant terminology.”

Schoeps claims that, for Kafka, the human soul needs a mediator (or a series of mediators) and that without such mediation transcendence remains final and our distance from it without hope. Without a mediator or mediators, he path to the next human heart, just like the road between heaven and earth, is simply “too long, to ever be followed.” Revelation may be a given—indeed, may be continually given—but a redemption fails to arrive. Schoeps cites a fragment from Kafka: “Through words come remnants of light [Quer durch die Worte kommen Reste von Licht].” Note the plural, “words” rather than “the Word,” as Barth’s “theology of the Word” would have insisted. The “miracle [Wunder]” of God’s “unfathomable act of love,” which alone is capable of bridging the gap, of crossing the divide, has, in Kafka’s eyes (in his “worldview,” Schoeps claims), simply not happened. Kafka’s Barthianism, his insistence and, perhaps, reliance on a wholly other, remains without mediation. There is, no doubt, the absolute—call it an infinity of access to infinite hope—but none of it is accessible to us, just as nothing in and of heaven finds its way back to earth.

Still, one wonders what a “Barthianism without mediator” could mean, since for Barth the theological concept of revelation is centrally tied to the figure of Christ—the positive rather than negative actualization of revelation, so to speak—more precisely, to his resurrection, which, in Barth’s view is the sole instance, the single “Word,” that puts
all powers—all gods, all of history, every culture, each anthropology, including the natural theologies that built upon such created being—to shame and renders them nothing. The resurrection actively deactivates and deactualizes all that exists in a relentless phenomenological epoché, out of which alone a new world may emerge and be given meaning, either again or for the first time:

The Gospel [Heilsbotschaft] of the Resurrection is the “power [Kraft] of God,” His virtus (Vulgate), the disclosing and apprehending of His meaning. His effective pre-eminence over all gods. It is the action [Handlung], the supreme miracle [Wunder aller Wunder], by which God, the unknown God dwelling in light unapproachable, the Holy One, Creator, and Redeemer, makes Himself known: “What therefore ye worship in ignorance, this set I forth unto you” (Acts 17:23). No divinities [Göttlichkeiten] remaining on this side of the line of resurrection; no divinity which dwells in temples made with hand or which is served by the hands of man; no divinities that “need anyone,” that is to say, any human being that pretends to know them (Acts 17:24, 25), can be God. God is the unknown God and, precisely, as such He bestows life and breath and all things. Therefore the power of God can be detected neither in the world of nature nor in the souls of men. It must not be confounded with any high, exalted force, known or knowable. The power of God is not the most exalted of forces, nor is it either their sum or their fount, but the crisis [Krisis] of all powers, the wholly other [das ganz andere], that by which all power is measured, and by which it is pronounced to be both something and nothing, nothing and something. . . . The power of God stands neither at the side of nor above (“supernatural [supranatural]”) the limited and limiting powers; not to be confused with them, not to be ranged among them, it cannot, save with the greatest caution, be compared with them. The power of God, the instauration [Einsetzung] of Jesus as the Christ, is in the strictest sense of the word a pre-supposition [Voraus-Setzung], free from any content that can be grasped.120

Given the negativity traced by Barth here, Kafka’s deepest insight and profound “unrest” paradoxically might, as Schoeps goes on to suggest, be closer to a Barthian Christian “truth” than is the faith of nominally “devout” Christians, who all too quickly assume their own salvation. Had it been taken to heart, such a truth would do greater justice to the disturbing fact that in Kafka the position of heaven vis-à-vis earth remains fundamentally “off,” that is, “crooked” and “warped,” just as the relationship between God and man retains an element of “oppressive uncertainty.”121 And yet to say and experience as much, Schoeps intimates, is the original, authentic, and ultimate religious disposition, “the religious archi-position as such [die religiöse Urposition schlechthin].”

In his letter to Benjamin, Adorno insists that the “inverse theology” in which Benjamin’s and his own conceptions of Kafka converge—or, more precisely, “disappear [verschwinden]”—is that of a fundamentally different “position or disposition [Standort],”
one that is "directed against natural and supernatural interpretation alike."122 In other words, it is as if the very distinction between a nontheological (i.e., "natural") and theological (i.e., "supernatural") interpretation collapses or no longer matters. From here on, evidently something else does: some other "position," "disposition," or even "imposition"—this time orienting itself and gesturing toward somewhere else or, perhaps, oriented to and attracted from elsewhere, beyond this world and beyond the otherworldly that would be its abstract, all too simple negation. In consequence, "inverse" or "other theology" is neither nonteological and atheistic (i.e., natural, humanist, secular, or profane), nor theological and theistic (meaning, in this context, dialectical and dogmatic, as Barth or Schoeps would have defined it). Yet in subverting these extremes and the very metaphysical dualisms they impose—in other words, in an unknown and altogether different sense—"inverse" or "other" theology is still deeply, if otherwise, "theological."

Unlike the "theology of the other" (which is the Barthianism Schoeps adopts), the "other theology" inverts all apparent oppositions. It reduces them to a virtual sameness against which the "other" of the "other theology" stands in a relation of total negation, even though, strangely, it somehow leaves this sameness in place and intact. Not of this world, "inverse" or "other" theology is in this world, all the same. Yet in fact this resembles the position—the Standort beyond natural and supernatural interpretation—that both Barth (in his early reading of Paul) and Schoeps (in his reading of Kafka) sought to develop or, more indirectly, gestured toward.

Our question, therefore, must be simply this: Why, in what sense, and how far does Adorno see Barth's or Schoeps's insistence on the "inner dialectic"—the "restlessness" and "truth"—of the subject and object of theological thinking going so badly wrong? How is it at fault when viewed from the perspective of a consistently negative and dialectical or, indeed, "inverse" or "other" theology? What would an "other," in Schoeps's words, "negative actualization of the understanding of revelation," whether Judaic or Christian, look like? How could it be differently "conditioned" and, perhaps, not rely on an "advancing process of secularization" at all?

In his correspondence with Brod, in his afterwords, and in several essays on Kafka's "spiritual form [geistige Form]" and the "theological motif" held to be central to his literary oeuvre, Schoeps construes the image of a fictional and narrative style in which human institutions can no longer uphold "any claim at religious authority,"123 indeed, are without mediation or mediator(s) and thus stand under genuine theological critique. As one commentator, Margarete Kohlenbach, points out in an essay in German Life and Letters, this is exactly the opposite of what Adorno suspects the dialectical-theological reading would produce, which is "the view of Kafka's castle as God's rule on earth."124 What else could the "theology of the Word of God," of the wholly other, signify but the image of an absolute sovereignty that leaves its imprint on creaturely matters? Yet, Kohlenbach rightly observes, the dialectical-theological reading Schoeps proposes in fact can and does "accommodate the social critique inherent in Kafka's depiction of power

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... without having to dismiss, as Adorno does, Kafka’s engagement with religion as irrelevant to his work.”

By extension or implication, following the logic of Kohlenbach’s account of Schoeps’s reading of Kafka, Barth’s dialectical theology—which does not discuss Kafka but draws on Dostoevsky and Ibsen instead—might well reveal the same potential for redemptive, call it “realistic,” “critique. Just as Barth’s early writing, starting with the first commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, published in 1919, could be seen, in its “antibourgeois rhetoric,” as a “Protestant counterpart” to Benjamin’s observation of the loss of “experience [Erfahrung]” and its transmissibility,” so too it could be seen as being finely attuned to the “structure that informs Kafka’s dilemma” (i.e., the need to think hope and redemption in a world that leaves no room for either). Kohlenbach continues: “While [Kafka’s] writings are far from upholding any belief in Christ, they display a cultural profile similar to that of Barth’s early teaching; an existential interest in redemption and revelation that co-exists with a strong mistrust of both traditional religion and its modern re- enactments.”

How is it that Adorno finds Kafka’s writings display nothing of the sort? Put differently, why would Adorno’s concept of an “inverse” and “other” theology be any less suspect of being politically dangerous or impotent, that is, of “mimicking the worst” or leaving everything as it is? Should not Adorno’s own work be read, precisely, in light of Kafka? To begin to answer these questions, we must determine further what the “inverse” or “other” definition and deployment of “theology” means here, spelling out its direction and evaluation of the things that exist. Most importantly, we must clarify in what sense its program consists in deploying what I would like to call a methodological—more precisely, optical—device, one that allows us to imagine a materialist hypothetical and deeply pragmatic perspective, though it is a perspectivism or perspectivalism for the sake of the Absolute, ad maiorem Dei gloriam, as it were.

Etymologically, inversus is the perfect passive participle of inverto (invertere), a verb that signifies “to invert,” that is, “to turn upside down.” A classic expression is daemon est deus inversus, “the devil is God,” not so much seen “through a glass darkly” but as if in a mirror image, as God’s flipside, idol, or counterfeit. In short, when the devil is taken for God, the worst is seen as the best. In “Notes on Kafka,” Adorno asserts that the “material” or “substance”—the Stoffgehalt—of Kafka’s narratives is hardly a reference to divine governance, just as The Castle and The Trial are not “two forms of expression of the very same being that the theologian is used to call ‘Grace [Gnade]’ and ‘Judgment [Gericht],’” as Schoeps had too hastily claimed. In Adorno’s words: “Dialectical theology fails in its attempt to appropriate him . . . because in Kafka, unlike in Fear and Trembling, ambiguity and obscurity are attributed not exclusively to the Other as such but to human beings and to the conditions in which they live. Precisely that ‘infinite qualitative distinction’ taught by Kierkegaard and Barth is leveled off.” Our very idea of “the other” and of the human condition is idolatrous, Adorno seems to imply. And yet we should not forget that nowhere in his writings does Barth “appropriate” Kafka for
theological, let alone apologetic, purposes—unless we are to take the reference to the one who is waiting at the door in the opening pages of the second edition of his commentary on the Epistle to the Romans as an oblique reference to Kafka’s “Before the Law.” Once again, the dialectical theology at which “Notes on Kafka” takes critical aim is above all Schoeps’s interpretation or, at least, presentation of it, not Barth’s own.

This is not to say that there is in Adorno’s writings no direct confrontation with Barth. He is explicitly mentioned in Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s 1947 Dialectic of Enlightenment and such other important documents as the 1958 dialogue with Eugen Kogon entitled “Reason and Revelation,” the lecture course Metaphysics, and Negative Dialectics. On the whole, the critique of the dialectical-theological interpretation of Kafka, for all its oblique characterization of the Barthian alternative, gives us sufficient material to work with. But before interrogating its pertinence and philosophical grounds, let me briefly mention one further example of Adorno’s categorical rejection of Barth’s dialectical-theological view in his later work.

Asked in 1965 by his former mentor Paul Tillich what he thought of “the new phase of theology which—following Heidegger’s and Bultmann’s philosophy of language—replaces all ontology with the ‘Word of God’” and, indeed, lets “language be as the ‘house of being,’ but without any ‘being’ in the house,” Adorno responded emphatically and, as so often, apodictically:

The word-of-God theology . . . I reject no less than you do. The mystical conception of language of which it is so reminiscent has meaning only in the context of a positive theology. Otherwise the philosophy of language becomes something like a fetishism of language. What is the word of God supposed to mean without God? No that won’t do, and not only will it finally lead to a resurrection of the liberal-secular moralization of theology, but these theologians will make common cause with the logical positivists, for whom language has a very similar function, namely to replace the subject.

This would seem to settle the matter decisively and, one assumes, for Tillich satisfactorily (after all, in his magnum opus, Systematic Theology, he did not hesitate to describe Barth’s dogmatic theology as a “demonic absolutism which throws the truth like stones at the heads of people not caring whether they can accept it or not”).

And yet what Adorno says critically here of the Barthian and Bultmannian “word-of-God theology,” together with what he had detected earlier in Schoeps’s dialectical-theological exegeses of Kafka, holds—at least, formally or structurally and logically—true of much of his own view of negative dialectics and the metaphysical or spiritual experience (geistige Erfahrung) on which it rests. The critique directed toward the “theology of the wholly other” merely reflects the one directed inward. The “inverse” or “other” theology stands equally condemned with dialectical theology, even if only implicitly.
“Inverse” and “other” theology—like the project of negative dialectics, with its “metaphysical meditations”—must thus fall under the same suspicion of letting the powers that be, well, just be. To say this is not to condemn Adorno’s objection against Schoeps or Barth as a whole, just as this observation is hardly fatal to Kafka’s world as he reads it. It is merely to suggest that what Adorno dismisses in Schoeps and Barth he takes as a standing risk of his own conception and larger undertaking as well. “Inverse” or “other” theology is thus not so different—formally, structurally, and logically—from the earliest articulation of dialectical theology as he had received it, just as the latter’s ultimate transformation, in Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*, into a “critically realistic” doctrine of faith sheds light on some of the consequences Adorno and his followers soon had to draw from the premises (“concepts,” “categories,” and “models,” *Negative Dialectics* calls them) whose deep pragmatic relevance we have, perhaps, been slow to appreciate.

Is there a more substantial distinction that would allow us to demarcate the two projects of rethinking the task and object (or subject) of “theology” under modern conditions? We can arrive at it by asking a simple question. Does Barth attribute dialectic(s) equally to the object of dogmatic theology—that is, the divine subject and its predicates—and to the human subject that seeks to “know” it through grace? In other words, is there a necessary contingency and conceptual—and, hence, theological—instability that affects the very heart of the Word of God? Is crisis our lot, as creaturely, fallen, and sinful, beings? Is it not the scandal of biblical and historical faith to postulate a contradiction—a kenosis and crucifixion, perhaps, even an antinomianism—in God himself? Ana- and post-theists have long drawn this conclusion. But does Barth? And is this what a “Barthianism without mediator(s)” finally comes down to? Should not Adorno agree?

The very assumption of a subject’s—even the divine subject’s—self-sufficiency and plenitude (that is to say, its original unity and final redemption) would seem to run counter to the dialectical apparatus that Adorno puts in place in *Negative Dialectics*, and well before. The one assumption—a silent theological axiom much more than an explicit hypothesis—that Adorno might no longer be willing to share is the claim that, irrespective of any mediation and every mediator, God’s own Word, God’s very own theology and thought (since God speaks the first, the last, and the final word and “only God has a concept of God”), is in and of itself true. To assume this is to postulate an un- or non- or antidialectical “God”; in other words, it is to believe that the divine is expressive, expressed, or expressible in toto. At the very least, it is to think that the Word of God has an integrality and integrity or intactness that, while unintelligible to us, retains an ineffable truth. God, on this reading, is the only “speculative realist” worthy of the name, since He alone knows and sees or wills what objectively exists or what is fully revealed and given, even independent of any correlative perception, witnessing, or knowledge.

How different is the claim made by Levinas that “the Infinite” does not exist first in and for itself, only in order subsequently to reveal—or express—itself, in part? Barth’s God is not the Infinite but “eternity [Ewigkeit],” whereas for Levinas there is neither a
first nor a last word, but much and many in between. But also for Barth, as McCormack reminds us, God’s “speech” is the very “mystery of God,” that is to say, it is premised on a “dialectic of veiling and unveiling in revelation,” which is the central assumption undergirding dialectical theology from beginning to end.136

Echoing Benjamin and Scholem, Adorno calls this the “Scripture” and “tradition” of “Kabbalah.” His program is not that of a “faith seeking understanding [fides quaerens intellectum]” nor that of an understanding seeking—or finding—faith. Instead, it is that of a thinking (Nachdenken) of what has already been said and done, thought and suffered, desired and enjoyed in light of an idea of redemption, even resurrection, that must remain negative. In that sense, negative dialectics and negative metaphysics, as Adorno sees them, follow not so much a credo as a tradition (i.e., “Scripture” and “Kabbalah”).

Adorno neither affirms nor denies that a ratio veritatis, a ratio summae naturae, lies behind or beyond this tradition, unlike Barth, who, in Fides Quaerens Intelliectum, claims that the ratio fidei (i.e., the credo) is “not identical” with the ratio veritatis (i.e., “the Word”).137 What Adorno might accept is that, in any tradition worthy of the name, what is needed is “a special movement of thought which goes beyond mere reading.”138 Likewise, Adorno would not deny that “ontic ratio precedes and grounds noetic ratio.”139 After all, this is the “primacy and prevalence of the objective [Vorrang des Objektiven],” of which Negative Dialectics makes so much from beginning to end. While Adorno avoids the terminology of the “ontic” (Heidegger) and “noetic” (Husserl), one can rightly surmise that this “prevalence of the objective” is the overall material and materialist direction that “inverse” theology aims to take. By contrast, when Adorno speaks of the ontological proof around which all philosophy ought to revolve, he thinks of Kant and perhaps Descartes, not Anselm.

There is no such thing in Barth—nor could there be in any dogmatic theology, however freely conceived—as a dialectical logic of contradiction, of determined rather than abstract negation all the way through, that is, all the way down to the very origin and supreme cause of the Creator God and His Revelation. Nor is there dialectics or contradiction all the way up into the very telos (alpha and omega) of it all: eschatology, the apocalypse, and all the redemptive features of the Kingdom of God, the restitutio in integrum. Even Barth’s most brazen speculations about God’s being in terms of a “pure negation” in The Epistle to the Romans or about the “Nothing [das Nichtige]” in the Church Dogmatics form no exception to this general rule. As McCormack writes: “to speak of Barth as ‘anti-metaphysical’ refers to his attitude towards a particular way of knowing (the path taken); it does not entail a bracketing-off of particular regions of discourse from discussion in an a priori fashion.”140 This means than an “anti-metaphysical stance in theology” is, in Barth’s eyes, fully compatible with an alternative discursive consideration of themes concerning the being and attributes of God, the doctrine of the Trinity, the dual nature of Christ, and so on.
What Barth rejects is a metaphysical method that would consist in “extrapolating from observed phenomena” so as to ascertain a “First Cause” or “First Principle.” Knowledge of God is an event, a miracle—nothing less, nothing more. Again, the only radical, original, or originary difference between Adorno and Barth concerns the reality and nature of the postulated origin (the Ursprung) and end (the telos or all in all), neither of which can be strictly affirmed or negated, known or inverted. Their opposition, then, entails a distinction that we cannot make yet cannot but make and that, moreover, when all is said and done, makes no difference either way.

Paradoxically, what might seem the fullest and most substantial distinction is thus also the emptiest, leaving only the thinnest line of demarcation between the two authors—or, rather, the two complexes of authors: Benjamin and Adorno, Schoeps and Barth—and the critical philosophical and theological projects for which they stand. (Indeed, the distinction in question runs between other authors, such as von Harnack and Taubes, and between these two and Marcion, just as necessarily). Between the two faces of negativity, only the miracle of faith—or, for that matter, of any epistemic or normative position or disposition—decides. The question, then, is how to understand and relate a positively posited “real” Infinity/Eternity that is dialectically and critically reflected and refracted in an infinitely finite, interminable interpretation, dialogue, and discourse (which would be Barth’s view) and an “infinity” that has itself become infinite movement, that is to say, infinitely—and hence only in that sense negatively—dialectical in its finite realization, its realization as something ultimately or potentially finite (which would be Adorno’s perspective). Yet a further question would be: How does one distinguish these two visions of the other from yet another idea of the infinite other, one that is merely the nonmethodological longing for an abstractly negated finitude tout court (which is, finally, Horkheimer’s philosophical and political impasse).

Here I can only mention the possible direction that the much-needed reimagining of these different perspectives on theological difference might take if it were to borrow from recent developments in phenomenology and in “post-continental” and “post-analytic” thought. Only by learning from these very different schools of thought can we envision a further formalization and de-formalization of the task that “inverse” or “other theology” sets itself.

Neither Barth nor Adorno—much less Schoeps, Taubes, Benjamin, or Horkheimer—offers the necessary theoretical and conceptual tools that would allow us to avoid the affirmation or negation of some posited positive “Real” (whether as Ursprung or Ziel, object or subject). Whether such a “Real” is seen as given in revelation and accepted in faith (as is claimed by Barth and Schoeps, albeit on different grounds) or denied and withheld in a strictly conceptual and deeply ascetic gesture of redemptive critique, the perennial avoidance of idolatry, conceptual or not (as in the case of Adorno), matters little. In both cases, the matter at heart—the Thing itself—calls for a far more radical
philosophical model of phenomenological reduction or dialectical logic, of deep pragmatism, as I have said.

It is clear that, in Adorno’s and Benjamin’s writings, no simple continuation of either traditional dogmatics or any of its well-known “heresies”—such as Gnosticism, Marcionism, or even antinomianism—is ever intended. “God” is not so much “interrupted” (as Benjamin Lazier seems to imply) as exposed to a “messianic reduction” (in Peter Fenves’s coinage), whose precise procedure can be detailed only with the help of phenomenological-analytical means as yet to be developed. Such investigation requires the use of what might seem an unlikely ally: the language and formalism of mathematical, geometric precision (speaking of tangents and circles, points without spatiotemporal extension, number and set theory, and the like).

Merely to speak of a secular or even postsecular theology, of sorts (as I have myself suggested at times), means to keep using designations that remain vague and do not truly capture the specificity of the inverse, other theology, as it seeks to demarcate itself from its apparent opposites, Barth’s dialectical theology and “critical realism,” to begin with.

Inversion as Direction

In the letter to Benjamin, Adorno characterizes Kafka’s work as “a photograph of our earthly life from the perspective of a redeemed life [eine Photographie des irdischen Lebens aus der Perspektive des erlöstes],” whereby the latter reveals itself in a strange—and estranged—optical light, in reverse, inversely, as a special effect without determining and proportionate cause that precedes the very act and order of creation as a sign of the causa sui. Hence, being sui generis, as it were, redeemed life is discernible only after the fact, by looking and leaning backward from where we, here and now, happen to find ourselves. As Kohlenbach rightly observes, the passage suggests a “directional” interpretation of the “inversion” that theology must undergo to begin to do justice to the world as Kafka’s imagined and evoked it:

We must assume that non-inverted, straight theology conceptualizes or “sees” God from the perspective of human, earthly life; and we must assume that Kafka and inverse theology look at earthly life from God’s point of view, or from the standpoint of redemption. Straight theology looks up to God in heaven, inverse theology looks down on man on earth. The inversion consists in the theological inquiry being turned around by one hundred and eighty degrees. This directional understanding of “inversion” is confirmed in the finale of *Minima Moralia*, where Adorno insists that knowledge requires a light that emanates from redemption and is shed onto the world. Inverse theology provides a picture of earthly life that is seen, or receives the light by which it can be seen, from a transcendent position.
Adorno’s inverse theology, not unlike Barth’s dialectical theology, thus stands opposed to “natural” or “philosophical” theologies and ontotheologies. But if this is so, both can also be said to “share one cognitive perspective,” albeit one that, for all its emphasis on reason, on faith seeking understanding (as Barth explains in *Fides Quaerens Intellectum*), and on the at once noetic and dianoetic aspects of rationality, broadly and speculatively conceived (in the case of Adorno), reveals itself as deeply paradoxical and aporetic at heart. The faculty or process of cognition may not be the locus of this “spiritual experience,” but certainly there is a minimal—call it tangential—intersection of optics, though not necessarily a single optic as its result.

For God to be God—and, in a nutshell, the claim that “God is God” sums up Barth’s entire dialectical theology and subsequent *Church Dogmatics*—he cannot be allowed any analogical presentation or representation in the realm of being, since he eludes the chain and hierarchy of its causes and proportionate effects. With comparable emphasis on ineffability, Adorno in one place says and virtually everywhere throughout his oeuvre implies that “even to think hope forsakes hope and works against it,” so that “one who believes in God therefore cannot believe in God. The possibility for which the divine name stands is maintained by whoever does not believe.” For Barth, by contrast, following a long tradition in modern theological thinking from Augustine via Aquinas and the Reformation up to at least Schleiermacher, God is “not a possible God but the God Who is.”

We have to wait until contemporary articulations of a certain post-theism or anatheism before this presupposition loses its self-evidence. But the qualification of Barth’s “realism” as “critical” and Adorno’s use of what could be described as materialist hypotheticals (not to be confused, as Taubes unfairly does, with some aesthetic or fictionalist “as if”) may well be a step in that direction. Thus, at least formally speaking, Adorno and Barth share a comparable inversion of the concept and metaphysical implication of analogy, of the traditional scholastic or onto-theological *analogia entis*, as well as of any figural-metaphorical transposition of finite onto infinite predicates. And *any* predicate, at least every predicate that we know of, is by definition finite, limited and limiting, hence in principle an instance of conceptual idolatry. This insight and circumstance is the *predication of predication*.

Both inverse and dialectical theology put into question the mainstay of both philosophical and dogmatic reflection throughout the history of Western theism, which is, first, the *analogia entis* and, second, that of the *analogia fidei*. They do so by means of a paradoxical logic that is more rhetorical (if deeply pragmatic, a form of “cultural politics,” as the late Rorty might have said) than ontological, even though through the very dialectics of discourse—of determinate negation, as Adorno says—certain indelible effects in the nature (origin, essence, and subsequent causes) of things are both projected and triggered as well. That is to say, both Adorno and Barth excel in developing a *rhetoric of radical transcendence and equally radical immanence*, portraying the latter as the negative image
or foil of the former and the former as the—now hidden, then revealed—“ground [Ursprung]” or vantage point of the latter, to the point where one inverts and reverts into the other. It is as if playing up the relentless immanence of things, while demythologizing older accounts of the animation and teleological movement of animate beings and material things, paradoxically yields a perspective that could not be envisioned without the preceding negative operation, that is, without a phenomenological epoché or reduction, of sorts.

Kohlenbach aptly describes this feature of inverse theology: “While the straight theologian sees redemption in both God and God’s hidden dominion on earth, the inverse theologian sees nothing but damnation, absolute alienation, universal blindness, and the hell of history... inverse theology replaces salvation history by its opposite.” But what would it mean, exactly, to replace “salvation history by its opposite”? Do both Adorno’s negative dialectics and Barth’s dialectical theology assume the form of an inverse theodicy, meaning that they demonstrate on historical and systematic grounds that, paradoxically, the conditions of possibility for the best and the worst, for wonder and woe, must, for all their contingency, be necessarily the same, and this, precisely, if the worst is not to have the final word?

The divine promise—the “hope of redemption,” as Adorno says—would then be stripped of any foothold in being, whether defined in ontological or empirical (historical, psychological, anthropological, political, and, indeed, even “religious”) terms. And yet we cannot not “think” or gesture toward it. In this respect, Adorno and Barth share a further motif: namely, that of the “unthinkability of desperation,” the Unausdenkbarkeit der Verzweiflung. Inverse theology thus muses about the interface between the planes of history as immanence (of its negative totality, that is), on the one hand, and of redemptive transcendence (i.e., of expressive, material revelation and realization), on the other. In other words, it muses about the miracle—if not necessarily the mediator or, more abstractly, the medium—that would allow us either to see or to project, as we will and indeed must. In fact, Schoeps’s formula of a “Barthianism without mediator(s)” captures the very sense and force of a position and disposition that ultimately both Adorno and Barth seem to espouse.

It would seem, then, that they both espouse what in Wittgensteinian and Spinozist terms one might call a dual aspect theory of reality, that is, a dual aspect concept of seeing and being, of seeing as being, of optics as ontology. That is to say, they portray history and hell, history as hell and history as redeemed, as two proverbial extremes that touch upon each other. But what would such touching mean? How and why, when and where, does the phenomenon of “the world as we find it” let itself be seen now as a rabbit, now as a duck, without ever being analogically related to either one of them and without these aspects having any single thing in common, save the elements of the world and their sum total, while being totally different, nonetheless? The unredeemed and the redeemed world are co-extensive in every respect and yet touch upon one another merely as a tangent
upon a circle; in other words, the point at which they touch has no extension in historical time and empirical space. The two perspectives cannot be bridged organically, teleologically, or in a piecemeal or approximate fashion. They are “the same,” yet different.

In sum, then, in some of their most striking and characteristic formulations, Adorno and Barth share a dialectical rhetoric less of question and answer, of looking backward and moving forward, than of a surprisingly apodictic and paratactic quality: a logic of exaggeration whose occasional harshness and sheer daring—revolving around two contrasting negativities, as we have seen—is hard to believe, let alone follow. And yet it is in their resolute and contemporary decisiveness that their current relevance for philosophy and theology may reside. They challenge and break away from the presentation and representation of religious content and theological form that a long legacy of Judeo-Christian meditation on the existence and essence of the divine names has taken for granted and that has obvious parallels in Islamic thought as well.

**Inversion as Evaluation**

We can thus conclude that the two faces of negativity that Adorno and Barth portray are strikingly similar in both contours and rhetorical styles. Whether the world stands already redeemed (which must be Barth’s view, despite the crisis mode and almost expressionistic mood of his work on Romans) or as unredeemed and quasi-unredeemable (which would be the lesson Adorno draws from Kafka), inverse and dialectical theology, that is, the “other theology” and the “theology of the wholly other,” *cohere*—indeed, *virtually overlap*—in their phenomenological and reductive depiction of the world as we know it and the “messianic logic” for which it calls.

And yet clearly their respective worlds are not the same—conceptually, theologically, metaphysically and politically. The distinction between their “all is (or will be) saved” and “all is (or may yet be) lost” is not grounded *criteriologically* but requires—indeed, calls for—something else: a performative gesture or passionate utterance that is neither an affirmative nor a negative statement or proposition, one that is, further, neither axiomatically decided and postulated nor deduced or hypothesized, but requires nothing short of a miracle, the belief in a miracle, the rethinking of belief as a miracle. In the context of Barth’s work this seems plausible enough, but does it also hold for Adorno?

It does if we realize that Adorno’s more memorable statements stand out not only by their negativity—by being made half in jest, with wry humor and tongue in cheek, if not insincerely or cynically—but also by the fact that as sweeping statements they obey an iron logic of *rhetorical exaggeration*, of outbidding and hence outwitting the no less firm grip of historical doctrine and the realities they reflect. Let me give two examples:

it is only in the absence of images that the full object could be conceived. Such absence concurs with the theological ban on images. Materialism brought that ban
into secular form by not permitting Utopia to be positively pictured; this is the substance of its negativity. At its most materialistic, materialism comes to agree with theology. Its great desire would be the resurrection of the flesh, a desire utterly foreign to idealism, the realm of the absolute spirit.153

And: “Christian dogmatics, in which the souls were conceived as awakening simultaneously with the resurrection of the flesh, was metaphysically more consistent—more enlightened, if you will—than speculative metaphysics, just as hope means physical resurrection and feels defrauded of the best part by its spiritualization.”154

As for Barth, the rhetorical flavor of his negativity can perhaps best be seen in his debates with his Catholic interlocutors and critics. McCormack summarizes the debate with one of his most formidable detractors, the Jesuit Erich Przywara:

To Barth’s wholly other God, Przywara contrasted Augustine’s God of the “analogia entis”—a momentous phrase destined to play a larger role in Barth’s debate with Catholicism. In Przywara’s view, Barth has put “in the place of the ‘analogy’ between God and the creature pure ‘negation.’” If the analogia entis of the Catholic concept of God means the mysterious tension of a “similar-dissimilar,” corresponding to the tension of the “God in and above us,” then in the Protestant concept of God, the “similarity” has been completely crossed out.155

On Przywara’s reading, then, Barth would not allow for a “true unity” between God and man, as signaled by the mystery of incarnation, still less for the “continuing presence of God in the world,” indicated by the existence of the historical Church. This objection, McCormack leaves no doubt, “could hardly be set aside as simply mistaken,” at least insofar as the Barth of the second edition of his work on Romans and his 1922 lecture “The Word of God” are concerned.156

Inversion as a Methodological Device

In the conceptual nexus between the two approaches—that is, between a dialectics that seeks to stay “negative” and a dialectics that seeks to stay, well, “dialectical”—inversion becomes a methodological device that consists in “retaining theological categories but ‘shrouding them in black.’”157 It reminds one of Heidegger’s—and, in explicitly theological matters, Jean-Luc Marion’s—procedure of “crossing out,” whether of “being,” “God,” or “God” defined as “being.” For Adorno, such “shrouding in black” or “crossing out” is hardly provisional, merely strategic, preparation for a renewed access to an original Creation that has somehow been lost or anticipation of a final redemption still certain to come. As in Barth, the “bomb-craters” and “empty spaces” in the historical plane of
immanence are the only points of reference we can truly rely on. Everything else stands under the prohibition of images, the Bilderverbot, or gives itself ephemerally, as a “trace of the other [Spur des Anderen]” alone.

The “origin” is a “goal” and cannot be seen, experienced, assumed, or postulated as an original “given.” The “fallacy” of all traditional and modern metaphysics and dialectics, then, is that it does not stay “negative”; it is “the direct elevation, the critique of what merely is, into positivity, as if the insufficiency of what is might guarantee that what is will be rid of that insufficiency. Even in extremis, a negated negative is not a positive.”

Like Barth, Adorno is fully aware that the theologoumena he invokes are “scandals [Anstösse] to modern thought” and imply nothing less than a “crisis of human perception.” But they need to be evaluated, that is to say, thought, expressed, decided, and followed up on, nonetheless, since they alone enable a paradoxical freedom whose near-impossible possibility remains a mere chimera—that is to say, a sheer impossibility—without them. Inverse theology allows us to see this.

Adorno drives home this point in a letter written to Horkheimer in 1941:

I have a weak, infinitely weak, feeling that it is still possible to think the secret, but I am honestly not yet in a position today to formulate the way in which it might be possible. The premise that theology is shrinking and will soon become invisible is one motif, while another is the conviction that, from the central point of view, there is no difference between theology’s relation to the negative and its relation to the positive. . . . But above all I think that everything we experience as true—not blindly, but as a conceptual impulse—and what presents itself to us as the index sui et falsi, only conveys this light as a reflection of that other light.

In the same vein, responding to Horkheimer’s comment that “You never say anything about the positive object of negative theology, yet you leave no doubt that such a theology exists,” Adorno responds: “I have no secret doctrine. I believe, however, that I have an eye for picking up from things the reflection of a source of light that could not be the object of intentions and thoughts.” Here we see, once more, an optics. As in Levinas’s and Spinoza’s concepts of expression, we find that Adorno’s resolutely negative metaphysics substitutes a becoming infinite of discourse for traditional infinity (the substantial ens increatum at the very beginning of things or the universal gathering of the all in all, the alpha and omega at the end of days). And yet Adorno leaves no doubt that we cannot not think, say, or write, what can no longer be thought, said, or written (and, perhaps, never could). The metaphysical objective, with its putative object and inevitable objectifications, remains fully operative, even though the conditions of its possibility are not yet realized and may very well not be realizable—being neither of nor for this world. Yet even in the midst of a necessary conceptual and practical askesis, we cannot exclude this unlikely possibility, that is to say, this possible impossibility. We cannot turn critical
thought into a resigned affirmation of the negative. Negative metaphysics, as Adorno sees and practices it, is not a metaphysics of the negative, like the negative Schopenhaurianism of Horkheimer. There must be some postulation of a “divine light,” indeed, of saturated phenomena (of gesättigte Anschauung, as Adorno says). As Kafka had written: “Through words come remnants of light.”

Impossibility, Paradox, Miracle

Whoever says God says miracle.

—Karl Barth, The Epistle to the Romans

There is no more telling characterization of the mode and modality of the event of revelation and the faith it requires (and not just inspires) than the fourth chapter of the second edition of Barth’s Epistle to the Romans, entitled “The Voice of History.” In this chapter, Barth claims that faith is, according to Paul, not the annihilation of the law but the fulfillment of its “meaning” and, in this sense, a “radical miracle.”

For Barth, as for Taubes, the question of revelation (or faith) and the miracle requires a critique of historical reason. “Religion” can and must be historicized, but the miracle of revelation and faith can and must not. McCormack summarizes the problem as follows:

The historian qua historian has no access to revelation and miracle. The historian works only with relative magnitudes, not absolutes. According to Barth, no objection could be raised against the employment of the method of the historians of religion. It corresponded to the demand for truthfulness, which had been self-evident within the bounds of science since Kant. But he quickly added that in employing this method, the historians of religion had stepped completely outside of the circle of peculiarly theological problems. “Where there is no talk of a religious relationship to the object, of revelation and miracle, but rather only of scientific knowing, of causes and effects, there faith and the doctrine of faith (i.e., theology in the strictest sense) are not involved.” The work of historians of religion is not entirely irrelevant to theology, however. It can and has performed essential service to theological work as a “profane propaedeutic.” It has had the effect of clearing the ground of all false objectifications of the object of theology.164

This may be the profound meaning of Barth’s “critical realism,” which, although it breaks away from the confines of the nineteenth-century historicist conception of the science of religion (Religionswissenschaft) and conceives of itself as theological dogmatics, nonetheless aspires toward a proper rationality of its own. This to say that Barth assumes
a certain preponderance of the object, while leaving no doubt that any subjective category, when brought to bear upon it, will stand in need of critical correction by the divine light of creation, revelation, and redemption. Indeed, the Prolegomena to Church Dogmatics state explicitly that the “religious relationship”—that is to say, faith—is the result of an act of divine grace, hence a miracle:

even in reaching its goal in man, even in the event of human faith in the Word of God, the Word of God is God’s miraculous act. We must believe in our faith no less than in the Word believed, i.e., even if we think and should regard our attitude to God’s Word as positive, even we thus confess our faith, we can regard it as positive only as it is made possible and actual by God, only as the miracle of the Holy Ghost and not as our work.

Or again:

The Word of God becomes knowable by making itself known. . . . The possibility of knowing the Word of God is God’s miracle in us just as much as the Word itself or its being spoken . . . our concern is to realize that the mutual indwelling and or union of the divine and human possibility, of man’s knowing and his being known by God, is an event in the freedom of man, and yet that it cannot be in any sense be regarded as its product, as the result of an intuition, of a conceivable or attainable deepening or enhancing of the life of the human soul.

Where it is spoken, the Word of God may (no, will) be prone to human, “nominalistic misunderstandings concerning the predicate” that, Barth adds, “cannot be rooted out unequivocally or definitively.” This, as we said above, is the predicament of predication, which requires nothing less than a miracle (of reference, as it were) for its own—always temporary or provisional, that is to say, dialectical—overcoming. As Barth explains:

It is the miracle of revelation and faith when the misunderstanding does not constantly recur, when proclamation is for us not just human willing and doing characterized in some way but also and primarily and decisively God’s own act, when human talk about God is for us not just that, but also and primarily and decisively God’s own speech. . . . The miracle of real proclamation does not consist in the fact that the willing and doing of proclaiming man with all its conditioning and in all its problems is set aside, that in some way a disappearance takes place and a gap arises in the reality of nature, and that in some way there steps into this gap a nakedly divine reality scarcely concealed by a mere remaining appearance of human reality. . . . The willing and doing of proclaiming man . . . is not in any sense set aside in real proclamation. As Christ became true man and remains true man to all eternity, real
proclamation becomes an event on the level of all other human events. It can be seen and heard on this level, and its being seen and heard is thus no mere appearance but must take place in full essentiality. Without the ambivalence, the liability to misunderstanding and the vulnerability with which this takes place, with which it is itself one event among many others, it could not be real proclamation.\footnote{169}

Barth’s “realism” consists in the assertion that divine proclamation takes place as an apparent event among others in the human world, albeit it one whose phenomenon is of the essence (and, indeed, is the essence) of the matter itself, \textit{die Sache selbst}.\footnote{170} McCormack cites Michael Beintker to drive this point home: “Barth’s placing of the reality before the possibility is the consistent result of his struggle for a thinking ‘from God to us,’ or alternatively, a ‘viewing things from God’s standpoint.’” In McCormack’s own words:

First, knowledge of God is an event . . . God must “show” Himself to our thinking if it is really to be conformed to Him, our knowledge is dependent upon a dialectical movement on God’s side (\textit{Realitätalektik}) . . . because the \textit{intelligere} is qualified in an event, “correct” thinking which conforms itself to its object is not an enduring state of affairs . . . the \textit{intellectus fidei} stands radically under an eschatological reservation. It is what human beings can do in the meantime, as they wait upon a fresh event of revelation.\footnote{171}

In that sense, Barth’s concept of revelation and of eschatology is less dialectical than affirmative. Even if we reject the characterization of Barth’s theology in terms of a positivism of revelation (as we should), something all too affirmative or positive, in critical dialectical or negative dialectical terms, seems still to remain.

One might be tempted to say either that Barth operates within a horizon not just of metaphysical themes but also of their overall premises, framings, and aims—irrespective of the fact that he follows a distinctly theological method—or that, even if the theological content does not measure up to the metaphysical substance, then it must exclude or transcend the parameters of traditional biblical and dogmatic theology. \textit{The Epistle to the Romans} and the \textit{Church Dogmatics} seem to have broken free from both the \textit{analogia fidei} and the \textit{analogia entis}.

This is not to say that Barth proposes a “negative natural theology”—like an oblique Marcionite—just as Adorno could not be said to propose a “negative metaphysics,” sensu stricto. It is, rather, to suggest that at certain points Barth’s and Adorno’s projects seem formally indistinguishable. More precisely, there is a formally decidable point of indiscernption, which is the common \textit{invocatio} of a messianic light or logic (a “theo-logic”) that is nonexistent in its substance and touches upon the historical in its totality as a tangent upon a circle.
Indeed, Adorno’s inverse, other theology relates to Barth’s theology of the wholly other—and vice versa—just as each author’s conception of the nonidentical relates to history and its immanence. Against the latter, they formulate an optics that requires a critical and realistic—hence, deformed or phenomenologically concretized—perspective to orient itself in and beyond the world as we know it. Put differently, at a certain level of abstraction or nuance, their respective positions do not seem to matter. Whether inverse or dialectical, whether an other theology or a theology of the wholly other, they each remain at an infinite remove from the object (or subject) they seek to express. This is only consistent, for only what is without concept (the nonidentical, das ganz Andere) adequately names what no concept—indeed, no name—can adequately capture as such. Only God has an idea (a concept, name, word, or rather Word) of God. Indeed, as Barth notes in Fides Quaerens Intellectum: “Every theological statement is an inadequate expression of its object. . . . Strictly speaking, it is only God himself who has a conception of God. All that we have are conceptions of objects, none of which is identical with God.” McCormack draws a simple but radical conclusion, namely, that for Barth—and, we might add, also for Adorno—“the ‘dialectic of life’ has no capacity in itself to bear witness to God and the recognition of contradictions of life can in no way be construed as a precondition on the human side for the revelation-event.” He continues: “That Barth was convinced that an affirmation and understanding of God can and does come about is clear. But how is this possible? The short answer is that God can only be known through God. Knowledge of God is possible as a divine possibility (miracle!) and never as a human possibility.” There is therefore an inescapable petitio principii—the impossible possibility of faith—which makes faith rather than its natural, historical, or positive forms as “religion” a self-contained and self-giving construction, which inaugurates (indeed, posits) what it must presuppose as its condition. As Barth puts it in Epistle to the Romans: the Gospel is “a communication which presumes faith in the living God, and which creates that which it presumes.”

But can we have a “theology” or “faith” without concepts, without form—that is to say, without philosophy, history, indeed, “religion”? Would this—a theology of faith without standpoint or position—if it were possible, not yield a form of un-faith as well? A truly radical contradiction would seem to have to extend to the very idea, figure, or reality of resurrection and the miracle of faith itself, that is to say, to the “medium” that, in Barth’s view, at once veils and unveils God’s revelation and the impossible possibility of redemption it both presents and represents. Adorno’s late paradoxical references to the motif of “resurrection,” the “ontological argument” for the existence of God, and “hope” suggest as much.

Why was Barth not willing or able to follow Adorno on this path? Two tentative answers to this question can be given. First, as McCormack explains, Barth drew on the work of his brother, Heinrich, whose concept of Ursprungsphilosophie entailed “the idea
that the Ursprung grounds human knowledge precisely by negating its prior attainments.”177 The “salvation-event” thus introduces a new relationship between “the ‘new humanity’ (an eschatological reality),” on the one hand, and “the ‘old humanity’ (the sinner living in time, in history),” on the other.178 Barth would claim that: “What occurs in the revelation-event is an awakening to an original relation long forgotten.”179 There is fine nuance then—perhaps a de facto imperceptible line of demarcation—between the anamnestic relation that theology speaks of and the salvaging critique that Adorno, systematizing Benjaminian intuitions in the most consistent, if not always most faithful, of ways, sees at the heart of all genuine thought, of metaphysical and spiritual experience, as he calls it.

Second, Barth spent enormous efforts on understanding the “ontological proof” in the version presented by Anselm of Canterbury. Much ink has been spilled over the question of whether his book on that topic, the 1931 Fides Quarens Intellec tum, constitutes his discourse on method—“a decisive turning point” in his intellectual development—or whether scholars have made too much of what can only be called, if not a “false start,” then at best a somewhat inconclusive detour. Does Barth’s book, as Hans-Urs von Balthasar claims, represent a “turn from dialectic to analogy,” whereby, McCormack explains, “‘dialectic’ was seen as an attempt to ground theology philosophically by means of the categories provided by existentialism and phenomenology; ‘analogy’ as an attempt to develop a ‘pure’ theology, grounded in revelation alone”?180 Or is this hypothesis of a clear caesura far too schematic?

Whether one considers the Church Dogmatics a continuation of dialectical theology or not, there seems little disagreement that this massive edifice theorizes God and His revelation “from within,” that is, without taking any lead from either created nature, anthropological givens, or cultural value, to say nothing of human conceptions of morality and politics. Art and, especially, Mozart may form an exception.

In a different context, I have discussed Adorno’s professed claim that he saw “no other possibility than an extreme askesis toward any type of revealed faith, an extreme loyalty to the prohibition of images [Bilderverbot], far beyond what this once originally meant.”181 I argued that this statement implies an aporetic and minimal theology, of sorts.182 The massive posthumous publication of Adorno’s lecture courses and correspondence largely corroborates this view. It is further strengthened by the surprising fact that an endorsement of the ontological proof is a recurrent motif in Adorno’s oeuvre.

Max Horkheimer’s “Longing for the Totally Other”

To speak of “theology” in terms of its “inversion” or “otherness,” like recasting theology in light of “the wholly other,” risks either tying its questioning inquiry and unquestioned faith back to a putative past or collapsing it into some unapproachable, ephemeral quality
that must remain unnamed. Must this dual predicament necessarily—indeed, theologically—be avoided at any price? Should it not rather be affirmed, as the very tension in and from which theology lives, from utterance of the very first word (or Word) that it speaks?

Neither inverse nor dialectical theology approaches the “argument” (though its tone is more that of a lament) Horkheimer propounds at the end of his life in his 1973 interview with Der Spiegel entitled “The Longing for the Totally Other.” In it, Horkheimer declares that “Critical Theory contains at least one idea about the theological, the other” and adds that it is “a yearning for a state in which the murderer might not triumph over the innocent victim.”

An interesting recent study by Pascal Eitler on the “politicization of religion” in Germany during the late sixties can shed light on this interview. Was the impasse into which Horkheimer pursued his theological considerations partly to blame for the fact that the second and third generations of Frankfurt School theorists shunned religion until quite recently, when its renewed public assertiveness finally left them no choice but to give the “post-secular” condition its due? If so, we owe it to Jürgen Habermas’s intellectual integrity to realize the normative deficit of Critical Theory and, beginning with his dialogue with then Cardinal Ratzinger, to address what was missing head on.

Horkheimer reduces to a simple impasse what in Adorno and Barth is “dialectically” and paradoxically, indeed, rhetorically and aporetically, forged and kept together, thus inviting philosophy and theology—which stood, in their views, for autonomous and dogmatic thinking—to enter into a new constellation and conversation. Adorno thus differs from Horkheimer in not lamenting this predicament or accepting it with resignation but affirming it in a way that fixing it in negative statements cannot. The latter strategy leads merely to abstract yearning or to the unhappy conscious of a musical thinking that, as Hegel knew, cannot arrive at a concept. In this respect, then, Adorno would seem closer to Barth than to Horkheimer.

But what good do such comparisons do? In reading Adorno with and against Barth (and vice versa) a possible answer to this question begins to emerge. It insists on the critical need and pragmatic usefulness of a return to these archives, including the involuntary memories that can surge up from them.

Neither Adorno nor Barth thinks of the “wholly other” as a merely abstract counterpoint to the phenomenal world as we find it. It is the “miracle of faith” (Barth) and the “immediacy” to which even a resolutely negative dialectics—proceeding through determinate negation and respecting the prohibition on images—remains answerable (and, deep down, attuned).

More than merely reacting to the totally regulated and administered world that seemed to be closing in, Adorno’s negative dialectic—especially as it takes the form of a “meditation,” “contemplation,” or “spiritual experience,” of sorts—follows the “trace of the other” in the most material and corporeal experiences of qualitative instances and
instants, whose minimal difference may yet make maximal difference in the world (inviting, demanding, and forcing its total recall and total makeover, nothing less). By the same token, Barth’s miracle of faith and the miracle of revelation—of God’s Word and of God speaking—concerns a “proclamation” that, for all its ambiguous and hence contestable, even revocable nature, where it is heard and obeyed leaves nothing untouched.

Neither model, the materialist and the ecclesial—or, rather, the minimal and maximal theological—optics that I have described here succeeds in demarcating itself fully from what seems its clearest opposite. In fact, I would claim, they find a common agreement in distancing themselves from the gratuitous gesture of all appeals that take “that which is other than what exists” to be a mere idea, however critical, but too good to ring true. The as if perspective, or, as I have called it, the dual aspect seeing of negative dialectics and its “spiritual experience” is anything but a resigned aestheticism, as Taubes unjustly insists. Yet if there is a meditative, contemplative aesthetic perspective in Adorno’s writing, it resembles the way in which Barth’s Church Dogmatics paints a whole universe “from the standpoint of God.”

That the result is not necessarily conformism or apologetics, naturalism or supernaturalism, indicates that the front lines between philosophy and theology, reason and revelation, knowledge and faith, no longer run between secular modernity and a supposedly traditional (if increasingly public and global) religion, but through each of these “domains” individually, and often where we expect them the least. It is not enough, then, to claim that the “modern disintegration of religion as a comprehensive social system means that writers and intellectuals can be in agreement with traditional theology and religion in some regards while opposing them in others”;186 nor does it suffice to characterize Adorno’s position in terms of “secular theology.”187 Similarly, it will not do to “abandon any unqualified dichotomy between the religious and the secular” or to “resist the dubious attraction of combining these concepts in a paradoxical or obscure fashion.”188 What other option do we have? What, in other words, does “inverse” or “other” theology have to offer us?

Adorno ties theology, in its positive, negative, mystical, and, one suspects, practical, liturgical, and aesthetic expressions to its reverse, its inverse, so as to bring out that our conceptualization, sense, and experience of the best (the highest good, justice, love, the Kingdom of God, redemption) share the same conditions of possibility as our conceptualization, sense, and experience of the very worst, the horror religiosus of which Kierkegaard speaks. Adorno further makes dramatically and rhetorically palpable that the inverse or other theology—even or especially in the minimal axiom that it shares with metaphysics “in the moment of its downfall,” that is to say, dialectically and negatively conceived—is not only paradoxical, provisional (a near-interminable set of “prolegomena,” as Barth claims) but aporetic, that is, self-contradictory, all the way down. Yet as we have seen, this negative dialectical view by no means excludes the adoption—in both “critical” and
“realistic” terms—of a God’s eye point of view, a messianic light seen from God’s perspective.

In the same measure, the affirmative, the “critically realistic,” dialectical stance and method that characterize Barth’s work by no means excludes the view that Christian dogmatics has no other eyes to see with than its own, that is to say, that it always speaks on its own account and hence says either too little or too much. Mutatis mutandis, the same aporia—the same tangential point of contact between a discourse and its other—is at work in any philosophy or any theology worthy of the name. At times, it seems that Adorno believes that metaphysics provides us with an idea, a possibility that theology then imposes on us as a reality, if not necessity. Barth, by contrast, places reality before possibility as he seeks to retrace the movement “from God to us.” Yet if the “inverse” and “other” theology resists both natural and supranatural interpretation, then it must refuse both these perspectives, especially when each of them presents itself in isolation.¹⁹⁰

It is far from clear that Taubes’s conception offers a way out of this predicament. As he notes, in his lectures he does not “think theologically” but works with “theological materials” from an “intellectual historical” or “actual historical [realgeschichtlich]” viewpoint: “I ask after the political potentials in theological metaphors, just as Schmitt asks after the theological potentials of legal concepts.”¹⁹¹ Moreover, Taubes adds, these metaphors are not so much “theologoumena” as a condensation of “experiences.”¹⁹² Such a view could hardly be espoused by Barth or Adorno. Dialectical and inverse theology share the conviction that experience is not an indubitable given whose myth we should live by. Their perspective—indeed, their perspectivism or perspectivalism—is radically different and takes root beneath and beyond the contents and categories that make up the historical and the political. Like Schmitt and Benjamin, they represent an “apocalypticism from the top down” and “from the bottom up,” although less radically, that is to say, less consistently and consequentially, so. What always marks apocalypticism, Taubes suggests, is a radical breaking away from the “apothecosis of the early,”¹⁹³ so prominent in Heidegger and Buber and put into question by Alois Riegler and Benjamin. To phrase this in different, temporal and anti-Hegelian terms, centering around the now and the fulfillment, if not annulment, of time, we could draw on Agamben’s insight that, for Paul (as for Taubes): “the messianic—the ungraspable quality of the ‘now’—is the very opening through which we may seize hold of time, achieving our representation of time, making it end. . . . the Torah finds its πληρόμα therein. . . . Hegel, however, thinks the pleroma not as each instant’s relation to the Messiah, but as the final result of a global process.”¹⁹⁴ Both Adorno and Barth, then, are resolute anti-Hegelians in this respect. Furthermore, if the meaning of Anselm’s proof, for Barth, was that of an explicatio,¹⁹⁵ an unfolding and exposition of the truth and act of faith within a single argument (unum argumentum), then the meaning and force of inverse theology is, by contrast, that of a multifaceted implicatio.

“Inverse” stands here for a folding and leading back of theological content into the very forms of life (i.e., the experiences and idioms) from which faith must begin by setting
itself apart. But it also signals the fact that these forms can and must be turned—
returned—to the richness and virtual presence of the religious archive from which it
escapes, in turn.

Conclusion

As I have reconstructed it, “inverse theology”—the radically “other theology” rather than
the “theology of the wholly other”—is the thinking and implication in reverse of modern
givens (whether concepts, practices, things, images, sounds, silences, etc.) within the theo-
logical contents and legacies from which they seemed to have emancipated themselves.
Such reverse implication is a movement that runs counter to much of the hermeneutic
tradition of scriptural exegesis or biblical interpretation, since it inscribes materials into
an archive whose anamnesis and cultural memory needs—and merits—salvaging in its
otherness.

I want to suggest that both Adorno’s and Barth’s projects, for all their differences,
find some confirmation in recent philosophical programs. These are very different in (and
among) themselves, in turn, but at least they seem to share a common intuition: the
deeply pragmatic—deep pragmatist—view that the object of our knowledge is constituted
by a subject that is itself instituted or called upon by the object in question, to the point
of becoming almost responsible for (if not exchangeable with) it.

I am thinking of Stanley Cavell’s noncriteriological view of “calling a thing so,” whose
claiming, acclaiming, and proclaiming retains or receives all the structural features of the
religious speech act, of “the passionate utterance.” In Must We Mean What We Say? Cavell
writes that “In its defense of truth against sophistry, philosophy has employed the same
literary genres as theology in its defense of the faith: against intellectual competition,
Dogmatics; against Dogmatics, the Confession; in both, the Dialogue.” In this passage,
“Dogmatics” refers to the theology of von Harnack, as well as to Barth’s revolt against
the culture of liberal Protestantism for which it stands. In Little Did I Know: Excerpts from
Memory, Cavell further mentions Barth, together with Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich,
among the representatives of the “new Christian theology” that seemed capable of form-
ing a bulwark against “the storm of logical positivism” that overran American campuses
virtually uncontested. Why was the theology of the wholly other more helpful in oppo-
sing it than Frankfurt School Critical Theory? That question has, to my knowledge, so far
neither been asked nor answered.

A tentative answer might be that, paradoxically, only the most relentless—negative
or critically realistic and dialectical—theology does not enshrine the world as it is, as it
presents itself to us in its natural, created, mechanistic, and lawlike immanence, whose
crust seems impossible to pierce or transcend. And yet we must not become transfixed by
the authority that the forces that be hold over us, just as we must not let ourselves be
trapped in the existing patterns of our individual and public lives by the apparent statistical fact that all odds are against escape. The good news is that what is historically and, perhaps, metaphysically—in any case, ontically and ontologically—determined to move in certain rather than other ways (or, more often than not, to stay in place or move in circles) reveals itself, *theologically speaking*, as mere contingency, that is, as finite and created, such that things, beings, and their relation are not necessarily what they now may seem. Their apparent necessity, even predestination, can be graced with an alternative gesture—call it love—that can invalidate and undo it.

Taubes finally may have intuited as much in the culmination to *The Political Theology of Paul*: "Romans 13—here I agree with Karl Barth—begins already with the end of 12, with the statement: 'Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good!' . . . If you stare at the topic of authority as if it were a predator [or rather: snake, Schlange], then it’s hard to see how to get out of there."197 Only in light of the broader context—the end of Romans 12, the remainder of Romans 13, with its declaration of love as the fulfillment of the law—Taubes continues, can the "absolutely revolutionary act" of the "one commandment," namely, to love the Lord with all your strength and your neighbor as yourself, become apparent. Indeed, Taubes concludes, "it belongs to the primordial core of Jesus’s Christ tradition. And that Paul couldn’t have missed. This is why it is a polemical formulation: this and only this is valid."198 Or, to put it once more in terms of the "inner logic of the messianic" and its paradoxical psychology, as Taubes sees it: "Here something is demanded at such a high price to the human soul that all works are nothing by comparison. . . . This is the point."199
35. Badiou writes in “What is Love?” that “love is precisely this: the advent [l’avénement] of the Two as such, the scene of Two” (Conditions, trans. Steven Corcoran [New York: Continuum, 2008], 188). See also his essay “The Scene of Two,” trans. Barbara P. Fulks, Lacanian Ink 21, pp. 42–55.


39. See note 23, above.

40. The OED provides the following etymology for “religion”: “a. AF. religiun (11th c.), F. religion, or ad. L. religin-em, of doubtful etymology, by Cicero connected with relegare to read over again, but by later authors with relige to bind, RELIGATE (see Lewis and Short, s.v.); the latter view has usually been favored by modern writers in explaining the force of the word by its supposed etymological meaning.”

41. Giorgio Agamben, Profanations, 75.

42. Agamben’s discussion here depends on that of Emile Benveniste in his remarkable account of the etymology of the word religion in Indo-European Language and Society, trans. E. Palmer (London: Faber and Faber, 1973). Benveniste defends Cicero’s account of the origin of the word religio as derived from legere: “In some, religio is a hesitation, a misgiving which holds back, a scruple which prevents and not a sentiment which impels to action or incites to a ritual practice” (521). Religion thus primarily signifies maintaining the separation of the sacred and the quotidian, hesitating before crossing the line.

43. Giorgio Agamben, Profanations, 77.

44. According to the OED, secular comes from saecularis, meaning a human age or cycle of the world: “secular, a. and n.: [in branch i, a. OF. seculer (mod.F. siècle), ad. L. seculum, generation, age, in Christian Latin ‘the world,’ esp. as opposed to the church: see siècle, siècle. In branch II, directly ad. L. seculum, whence mod.F. séculaire (which has influenced some of the uses in Eng.). Cf. Sp. secular, secular, Pg. secular, It. secolare.] A. adj. 1. Of or pertaining to the world. 1. Eccl. a. Of members of the clergy: Living ‘in the world’ and not in monastic seclusion, as distinguished from ‘regular’ and ‘religious.’ secular canon: see canon n.2 secular abbot: a person not a monk, who had the title and part of the revenues, but not the functions of an abbot.”

Inverse Versus Dialectical Theology: The Two Faces of Negativity and the Miracle of Faith, by Hent de Vries

NOTE: An early version of this essay was presented as the Eberhart L. Faber Lecture at a conference entitled “Rhetorics of Religion in Germany, 1900–1950,” organized by the Departments of German and of Religion at Princeton University from March 31 to April 2, 2011. I would like to thank
Michael Jennings and Leora Batmitzky for their kind invitation and for a host of insightful comments in the ensuing conversations. A later version of the essay was presented as a plenary lecture at the School of Criticism and Theory at Cornell University on July 16, 2012. I thank Amanda Anderson for her generous invitation to offer a six-week seminar entitled “Miracles, Events, Effects” and the participants in the program for helpful promptings to strengthen my argument.


4. Ibid., 16.


6. Ibid., 16–18.

7. Ibid., 16.

8. Ibid., 16.


10. Ibid., 24.

11. Ibid., 17.

12. Ibid., 18.

13. Ibid.; cf. ibid., 54.

14. Ibid., 51. This anti-Semitic tradition, Taubes explains, has to do with the confusion between the meaning of *hostis* and *minimus* in the sentence “As regards the gospels they are enemies.” As Taubes insists, like Derrida in *The Politics of Friendship*, in this invocation of the enemies of God: “Enemy is not a private concept . . . When it say, ‘Love your enemies’—yes, perhaps. I’m not sure what it means there in the Sermon of the Mount. Here, in any case, we are not dealing with private feuds, but with salvation—historical enemies of God. Enemies for your sake, but as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their forefathers” (ibid.).

15. Ibid., 17–19.

16. Ibid., 38.

17. Ibid., 32. Taubes terms Rosenzweig’s *Star of Redemption* an “ingenious breakthrough,” which seeks to “interpret the religious community through its liturgy” (34).
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., 25.
20. Ibid., 44.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., 19.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 39.
26. Ibid. 40.
27. Ibid., 52–53.
28. Ibid., 40; trans. modified.
29. Ibid., 41; trans. modified.
30. Ibid.
33. Ibid., 116.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid., 117.
40. Ibid., 117.
41. Ibid., 118, 121, and 117, respectively.
42. Ibid., 121.
43. Ibid., 70–71.
44. Ibid., 123. *Fear and Trembling* is also central to Derrida’s understanding of Paul, although, in sharp contrast with Taubes, he distinguishes between “the messianic” or “messianicity” and “a Messiah” or historical messianisms, while acknowledging that the former remain contingent up and contaminated by the latter. I have analyzed these notions at length in Hent de Vries, *Religion and Violence: Philosophical Perspectives from Kant to Derrida* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), chaps. 3 and 4.
45. Taubes, The Political Theology of Paul, 38.
46. This parallelism has also been remarked by Levinas and Derrida, though in different ways; see Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999). See also my *Religion and Violence*, chap. 4.
47. Taubes, The Political Theology of Paul, 23.
48. Ibid., 25.
49. Ibid., 24.
50. Ibid., 24; trans. modified.
51. Ibid., 26.
52. Ibid., 28.
53. Ibid., 47.
54. Ibid., 53.
55. Ibid., 54.
56. Ibid., 25.
57. Ibid., 28.
58. Ibid., trans. modified.
59. Ibid., 48.
60. Ibid., 32.
61. Ibid., 46.
62. Ibid., 47.
64. Taubes, The Political Theology of Paul, 84.
65. Indeed, there was even an oblique personal connection between the two thinkers: Taubes’s father, Hayim Zwi Taubes (1900–66), the Chief Rabbi of Zürich, visited Barth on June 25, 1944, to share one of the first reports on the deportation and execution of East-European Jews. See: Eberhard Busch, Unter dem Bogen des einen Bundes: Karl Barth und die Juden 1933–1945 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchner Verlagsgesellschaft, 1996), 455n.58; Mark R. Lindsay, Barth, Israel, and Jesus: Karl Barth’s Theology of Israel (London: Ashgate, 2007), 34.
68. See Matthias D. Wüthrich, Gott und das Nichtige: Eine Untersuchung zur Rede vom Nichtigem ausgehend von par. 50 der Kirchlichen Dogmatik Karl Barths (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2006).
69. Barth, The Epistle to the Romans, 1.
70. Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, 13 vols., trans. G. W. Bromly, G. T. Thomson, and Harold Knight (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 1.1.3.
Kingship in a Hellenistic Framework (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001). All these should be seen against the background of a much older tradition of scholarship, e.g. the essays collected in Karl Heinrich Rengstorff, with Ulrich Luck, eds., Das Paulusbild in der neueren deutschen Forschung (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1964).


75. Ibid., 140–41; my emphasis. The reference to reversal calls to mind the logic of inverse proportions that Peter Brown distills from Augustine’s wrestling with the popular belief in miracles. For an argument that, in Augustine, the miracle serves as an organizing principle, as the paradoxical, spatiotemporal logic that informs (and forms itself in) the messianic event, see Hent de Vries, “Fast Forward; or, The Theologico-Political Event in Quick Motion (Miracles, Media, and Multitudes in St. Augustine),” in How the West Was Won: Essays on the Literary Imagination, the Canon and the Christian Middle Ages for Burcht Pranger, ed. Willemien Otten, Arjo Vanderjagt, and Hent de Vries (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 255–80.

76. Schmitt refers to dialectical theology and to the Barthian phrase the “wholly other [ganz Andere]” in the preface to the second edition of his Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 2: “Among Protestant theologians, Heinrich Forsthoff and Friedrich Gogarten, in particular, have shown that without a concept of secularization we cannot understand our history of the last centuries. To be sure, Protestant theology presents a different, supposedly unpolitical doctrine, conceiving of God as the ‘wholly other,’ just as in political liberalism the state and politics are conceived of as the ‘wholly other.’ We have come to recognize that the political is the total, and as a result we know that any decision about whether something is unpolitical is always a political decision, irrespective of who decides and what reasons are advanced. This also holds for the question whether a particular theology is a political or an unpolitical theology.” Cf. Dieter Schellong, “Jenseits von politischer und unpolitischer Theologie: Grundentscheidungen der ‘Dialektischen Theologie,’” in Der Fürst dieser Welt: Carl Schmitt und die Folgen, ed. Jacob Taubes (Munich: Wilhelm Fink/Ferninand Schöningh, 1985), 292–315. On Barth’s politics, see William Werpehowski, “Barth and Politics,” in The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 228–42. On Barth and Schmitt, see Mathias Eichhorn, Es wird regiert! Der Staat im Denken Karl Barth’s und Carl Schmitts in den Jahren 1919 bis 1938 (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1994).


78. Taubes, The Political Theology of Paul, 75. As Bruce L. McCormack, in Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909–1936 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), recalls: “It is well known that Barth disdained the term ‘dialectical theology’ as a piece of self-description. Given, above all, the tensions which existed between the members of the dialectical theological movement throughout the 1920s and their eventual break-up, Barth’s reticence in this regard is understandable” (464). McCormack gives this as one of the reasons for his own preference for the phrase “critically realistic,” which allows him to distinguish Barth’s undertaking from the dialectical theologies of the early Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich. At the same time, McCormack states: “Karl Barth remained a dialectical theologian throughout all the phases of his development subsequent to, say, 1915” (Bruce L. McCormack, Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the
Theology of Karl Barth (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2008), 292). Or again: “Barth’s development was indeed the unfolding of a single material insight through several differing models of explication” (McCormack, Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology, 20).

79. Taubes, The Political Theology of Paul, 75–76.

80. Ironically, Barth is the target of a similar critique by his younger colleague Erik Peterson, whose pamphlet “Was ist Theologie?” accuses him of thinking in paradoxes, of saying everything and nothing, hence, of becoming vacuous and abstract.


84. Taubes, The Political Theology of Paul, 57.


86. Taubes, The Political Theology of Paul, 60.

87. Ibid., 72.

88. Ibid., 74.

89. Jacob Taubes, “Walter Benjamin—Ein moderner Marcionit? Scholems Benjamin-Interpretation religionsgeschichtlich überprüft,” in Taubes, Der Preis des Messianismus, 53–65. For an overview of the Marcionite current in early- and mid-twentieth-century thought, see Faber, Politische Dämonologie. We do not know whether Benjamin was familiar with Harnack’s writings on Marcion, but we do know that in the spring of 1918 he was immersed in Harnack’s three-volume Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte (Jean-Michel Palmier, Walter Benjamin: Lumpensammler, Engel und bucklicht Männlein—Ästhetik und Politik bei Walter Benjamin, ed. Florent Perrier, trans.
Horst Brühmann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009), 399n.290. At about the same time, he
was also steeped in reading Heidegger, in whose “nihilism” Taubes’s later wife, Susan Anima
Taubes, would detect “Gnostic foundations,” in an article that captures something of the spirit of
the times in which Sein und Zeit was received and categorized (Susan Anima Taubes, “The Gnostic
Foundations of Heidegger’s Nihilism,” Journal of Religion 34 [1954]: 155–72). See also Susan
Taubes, Die Korrespondenz mit Jacob Taubes 1950–1951, ed. Christina Pareigis, with Almut Hüfler
(Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2011).

90. Taubes, The Political Theology of Paul, 84–85.
91. Ibid., 85.
92. Barth, Epistle to the Romans, 13.
93. Ibid.
94. On the motif of “nothing,” see von Harnack, Marcion, 2.
95. Ibid., 18, and Appendix 6 in the German edition, entitled “Die Überlieferung über die Lehre
Marcions und über seine Kirche,” 314 ff.
96. Adolf von Harnack, Marcion: Der moderne Gläubige des 2. Jahrhunderts, der erste Reformato,r
critical edition of the 1870 prize manuscript, ed. Friedemann Steck (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter,
2003). It is no accident, therefore, that Marcionite elements have been detected in modernist
authors. One might mention Charles Baudelaire, in Flowers of Evil, Thomas Mann, in Doctor Faustus,
Paul Celan, and Samuel Beckett. See Faber, Politische Dämonologie, 32–36, 38–44.
Theologie, ed. Jürgen Moltmann, vol. 1, Karl Barth, Heinrich Barth, Emil Brunner (Munich: C.
Kaiser, 1974), 323–47.
98. Taubes, The Political Theology of Paul, 10.
99. Jacob Taubes, “Dialectic and Analogy,” From Cult to Culture, 165–76; idem, “Theodicy and
Theology: A Philosophical Analysis of Karl Barth’s Dialectical Theology,” From Cult to Culture,
177–94. See also Dieter Schellong, “Jakob Taubes zu Karl Barth,” in Abendländische Eschatologie, ed.
Faber, Goodman-Thau, and Macho, 385–93.
100. Jacob Taubes, “Christian Nihilism” (review of Karl Barth, Against the Stream), Commentary
101. Taubes, From Cult to Culture, 182–83; trans. modified.
102. Ibid., 193–94; my emphasis.
103. Cf. Faber, Politische Dämonologie.
dialektischen Theologie, vol. 2, Rudolf Bultmann, Friedrich Gogarten, Eduard Thurneysen (Munich:
C. Kaiser Verlag, 1967).
105. Taubes, The Political Theology of Paul, 76.
106. Bruce McCormack, “Not a Possible God but the God Who Is: Observations on Friedrich
Schleiermacher’s Doctrine of God,” in The Reality of Faith: Studies in Karl Barth, ed. Bruce McCormack
and Gerrit Neven (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 111–40.
108. Hent de Vries, Minimal Theologies: Critiques of Secular Reason in Theodor W. Adorno and
12, 601–30.
109. Cited after James C. Livingston, Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, Sarah Coakly, and James H.
Evans Jr., eds., Modern Christian Thought: The Twentieth Century, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress
Press, 2006), 64.


112. Schoeps, who had corresponded extensively with Barth and had published in Die christliche Welt, which Barth had joined as an editorial assistant in 1908, was known for his German-Jewish nationalist writings. Ever delicate in these matters, Taubes calls him “the Prussian Jew Hans Joachim Schoeps” (Taubes, From Cult to Culture, 46). See also Richard Faber, Deutschbewusstes Judentum und jüdischbewusstes Deutschland: Der Historische und Politische Theologe Hans-Joachim Schoeps (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2008).


120. Barth, Epistle to the Romans, 35–36; trans. modified. The reference to an “unknown god” is also taken as a point of departure by van Harnack, who suggests that Marcion developed this notion from that of an “eventual god” to that of a radically “alien” God, thus departing from the Hellenizing and gnostic tendencies of his time that Paul confronted, as the scene on the Areopagus in Acts testifies. Moreover, the idea of an absolutely presuppositionless assumption or instauration is an eminently phenomenological operation, which brings Barth into the vicinity of Husserl, with whose concept of the phenomenologically originally given—together with the “reduction” and neutralization of the natural disposition—it shows remarkable parallels. See Hendrik Johan Adriaanse, Zu den Sachen Selbst: Versuch einer Konfrontation der Theologie Karl Barths mit der phänomenologischen Philosophie Edmund Husserls (The Hague: Mouton, 1974), and also Peter Fenves, The Messianic Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2011).


124. Ibid.
125. Ibid.
127. Ibid., 151; my emphasis.
128. Ibid., 154: “In 1963, Adorno publicly acknowledged that, while much of the German (dialectical-theological) Kierkegaard reception merged with the extreme right, Barth himself was unwavering in his active resistance to National Socialism. In the light of this concession on Adorno’s part, the general political indictment of dialectical theology in ‘Notes on Kafka’ proves untenable. See Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Kierkegaard Noch einmal,” in Kierkegaard Konstruktion des Ästhetischen,” Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), 293–320. Here is not the place to begin to analyze Adorno’s invectives against Barth and dialectical theology generally: one should start with Jargon of Authenticity.
129. Cf. Kohlenbach, “Kafka, Critical Theory, Dialectical Theology,” 154: “A radical concept of transcendence favors the mistrust in social institutions and political power but cannot, due to its very nature, determine the way in which the individuals or groups upholding such a concept actually engage with practical institutions and power relations.... If anything is wrong with dialectical theology, it is not that it is intrinsically ideological but that it is political unhelpful.”
131. Adorno, “Notes on Kafka,” 259. Adorno attributes to Kierkegaard’s influence on Barth a far greater role than is borne out by the facts; see McCormack, Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology, 235–40.
136. McCormack, Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology, 428–29. The reference is to Barth’s Church Dogmatics, 1.
137. McCormack, Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology, 430.
138. Ibid.
139. Ibid.
140. Ibid., 246.
141. Ibid.
142. See Lazier, God Interrupted, and Fenves, The Messianic Reduction.
145. Ibid.
146. Ibid.
148. Ibid.


152. Cf. McCormack, Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology, 243–44: “The frequent depiction of the rhetorical style of Romans II as expressionistic is correct as far as it goes, but it does not tell the whole story: ... What makes the style of Romans II distinctive is the tone of anger with which it is written; its proclivity for ‘indirect communication’ ... and paradoxical forms of expression (i.e., ‘through faith, we are what we are not’!). Above all, the second edition is radical in its one-sidedness. But, strictly speaking, this (‘one-sidedness’; seeing one side of things at once) is, precisely, what dual aspect seeing implies. One does not see two sides at once, with each side excluding the other. Both are true de jure and appropriate de facto, that is to say, in the relevant pragmatic context. McCormack makes a further reference to expressionism, suggesting that the journal Zwischen den Zeiten—founded in 1923 by Barth, Thurneyse, and Gogarten, as a medium for “progressive, anti-establishment theology”—“was to theology, one might say, what Herwarth Walden’s Der Sturm had been to expressionistic painting and Franz Pfemfert’s Die Aktion to expressionistic literature in pre-war Berlin: journals whose very names breathed discontent and rebellion” (ibid., 314).

153. Adorno, Negative Dialectics, 207.

154. Ibid., 401.


158. See de Vries, Minimal Theologies, 216.

159. Adorno, Negative Dialectics, 393.


164. McCormack, Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology, 74. The quotes are from Karl Barth, “Der christliche Glaube und die Geschichte,” in Schweizerische theologische Zeitschrift 29 (1912); 1–18; 49–72, 4, and 5.
165. See also D. Paul La Montagne, Barth and Rationality: Critical Realism in Theology, Foreword by Bruce L. McCormack (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2012).

166. Barth, Church Dogmatics, 1:1, 180.
167. Ibid., 260.
168. Ibid., 95.
169. Ibid., 95–96.
172. Barth, Fides Quaerens Intelectum, 29.
173. McCormack, Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology, 239.
174. Ibid., 248.
175. Barth, The Epistle to the Romans, 114.
176. Barth, The Epistle to the Romans, 28.
177. McCormack, Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology, 237.
178. Ibid., 238.
179. Ibid.
180. Ibid.


182. See de Vries, Minimal Theologies, 601–30, and passim.


187. Ibid.
188. Ibid., 148.

189. Agamben may have a point when he relates “inversion” to Scholm’s understanding of the peculiar temporality of the messianic idea: “One of the theses (the eighty-third, to be exact) Scholm wanted to offer Benjamin on his twentieth birthday in 1918 reads, ‘Messianic time is time of inverse waw.’ The Hebrew system of verbs distinguishes between verb forms not so much according to tense (past and future) but according to aspect: complete (which is usually translated by the past), and incomplete (usually translated by the future). If, however, you put a waw (which is, for this reason, called inverse or converersive) before a complete form, it changes it into an incomplete, and vice versa. According to Scholm’s astute suggestion (which Benjamin may have recalled years later), messianic time is neither the complete nor the incomplete, neither the past nor the future, but the inversion of both. This converersive movement is perfectly rendered in the Pauline typological...
relation as an area of tension in which two times enter into the constellation the apostle called ἡ ἰῳνία καιρός. Here, the past (the complete) rediscovers actuality and becomes unfulfilled, and the present (the incomplete) acquires a kind of fulfillment” (Agamben, The Time That Remains, 74–75, cf. 97). The passage quoted from Scholem is from The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 295. Note that, on Agamben’s reading, the messianic time or kairos is less timeless “time” or another time, than this time altered and, as it were, curved or warped: “for Paul, the messianic is not a third eon situated between two times; but rather, it is a caesura that divides the division between times and introduces a remnant, a zone of undecidability in which the past is dislocated into the present and the present is extended into the past” (Agamben, The Time That Remains, 74). Or again: “Kairos (which would be translated banally as ‘occasion’) does not have another time at its disposal; in other words, what we take hold of when we seize kairos is not another time, but a contracted and abridged chronos” (ibid., 69). All this means that, as 2 Cor. 12:9 has it, “Power [or potentiality] realizes itself in weakness [dynamis en astheneia teleitai].” Or again: “God has chosen weak things of the world to shame the things that are mighty” (1 Cor. 1:27)” (Cited after ibid., 97). This, Agamben goes on to suggest, means that things of the world—and, indeed, the law—are not annihilated but rendered “inoperative,” “ineffective,” that is, “deactivated” (ibid., 97–98).

191. Ibid., 73.
192. Ibid., 7.
194. McCormack, Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology, 434.
195. Ibid., 70–71.
197. Taubes, The Political Theology of Paul, 52.
198. Ibid., 53.
199. Ibid., 10.