

REVELATION, EXCEPTION AND 'INDIRECT COMMUNICATION': ON POLITICAL THEOLOGY WITHOUT SOVEREIGNTY

PETRA BROWN

Faculty of Arts and Education, Deakin University
petra.b@deakin.edu.au

ABSTRACT

As a response to the recent resurgence of a “Schmittian-style faith in sovereignty,” Vatter argues for a “political theology without sovereignty,” through analysing the relationship between democracy and theological concepts in *Divine Democracy*. In this paper, I consider dimensions of the relationship between revelation, exception and political life that are less explored in *Divine Democracy*. I examine the concept of exception in the context of revelation and sovereignty, as this emerges in Carl Schmitt’s *Political Theology* and Karl Jasper’s writing on the relationship between truth, exception, and communication. I locate Schmitt’s and Jasper’s interests in the exception in their respective readings of Kierkegaard and explore the extent to which Schmitt and Jaspers align with Kierkegaard’s writing on the exception in his early, pseudonymous writing. The paper concludes to suggest that Kierkegaard provides a model for political engagement that disrupts totalising political structures, particularly as these might be rooted in claims to sovereignty aligned with states of exception, and makes room for marginal and marginalized voices. As such, Kierkegaard aligns with Vatter’s project of arguing for political theology without sovereignty.

KEYWORDS

Political theology; exception; revelation; democracy; Kierkegaard; Schmitt; Jaspers

Political theology continues to influence modern politics, particularly in the resurgence of a “Schmittian-style” faith in sovereignty, as Miguel Vatter notes in the conclusion of his book *Divine Democracy*.¹ Vatter’s book is primarily a treatise that considers “the problem of democratic political theology” offering an argument for “political theology without sovereignty.”² In the text, Vatter provides a study of major contributors to the 20th century discourse of political theology, pairing each

¹ Miguel Vatter, *Divine Democracy: Political Theology after Carl Schmitt* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 245.

² Vatter, 1, 4.

with a political concept fundamentally important to modern democracy.³ The concept of exception, or revelation, is of key interest to political theologians in the context of modernity. In this paper, I attend to dimensions of the relationship between revelation, exception and political life, that are less explored in *Divine Democracy*. This is primarily through examining the concept of exception in the context of revelation and sovereignty, as this emerges in Schmitt's *Political Theology* and Jasper's writing on the relationship between truth, exception and communication.⁴ While Carl Schmitt is extensively discussed in *Divine Democracy* in chapter 1, the concept of exception is discussed primarily in relation to Jaspers, even though Schmitt introduced the concept into modern discourse.⁵ In this paper, I locate Schmitt's and Jasper's interests in the exception in their respective readings of Kierkegaard. Vatter makes little reference to Kierkegaard in *Divine Democracy*, and when he does, it is primarily in relation to Jaspers and not at all in relation to Schmitt, despite Schmitt directly drawing on Kierkegaard in *Political Theology* to justify his theory of exception. Both Schmitt and Jaspers belong to the generation of German intellectuals who, in the first half of the 20th century, read Kierkegaard for both academic purposes and personal edification.⁶ And as I will show, Kierkegaard directly influenced their respective conceptualisations of the exception, yet Schmitt and Jaspers have very difficult conclusions about the place of the exception in relation to faith, reason and communication in political life. In this paper, I consider the ways Schmitt and Jaspers align with Kierkegaard's writing on the exception in his early, pseudonymous writing. The paper concludes to suggest

³ Vatter, 5.

⁴ This article takes as its starting point Kierkegaard's "suprarationalist account of revelation" as the "absolute paradox," which is intended as a "conceptual expression for the total incommensurability between an infinite God and a finite human intellect." Steven M. Emmanuel, *Kierkegaard and the Concept of Revelation* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), x. Whilst there are other theological and philosophical accounts of revelation (including Vatter's own discussion *Divine Democracy*), the Kierkegaardian (and Protestant) concept informs the development of the concept of exception in both Schmitt and Jaspers.

⁵ Nearly half the references to the exception occur in three pages, where Vatter discusses Jaspers and the exception, in relation to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche (220-223). This section is, in turn, embedded in a chapter on Habermas and public reason, where Jaspers and the universality of faith are discussed in detail across six pages.

⁶ For more on this see Conrad Burkhard, "Kierkegaard's Moment: Carl Schmitt and His Historical Concept of Decision," in *Redescriptions: Yearbook of Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2009), 145-71, 157. Schmitt makes a total of three explicit references to Kierkegaard in his work, in each of three published texts, *Political Romanticism* (1919), *Political Theology* (1923) and *The Concept of the Political* (1932). Jaspers published extensively on Nietzsche, and little directly on Kierkegaard, although 'it is the latter whose influence on Jaspers was stronger.' Karl Jaspers, *Karl Jaspers: Basic Philosophical Writings*, eds. Leonard H. Erlich, Edith Erlich, and George B. Pepper (Atlantic Heights: Humanities Press International, 1994), 37-38.

that Kierkegaard provides a model for political engagement that disrupts totalising political structures, particularly as these might be rooted in claims to sovereignty aligned with states of exception, and makes room for marginal and marginalized voices. As such, Kierkegaard aligns with Vatter's project of arguing for political theology without sovereignty.

This paper is organised in four parts. In the first part, I explore the concept of the exception in *Political Theology*, drawing attention to the way the theological concept of the miracle (understood as revelation) informs Schmitt's development of the exception, and highlighting the use of Kierkegaard by Schmitt in this process. I also draw attention to a key feature of Schmitt's concept of the revelational exception in the political sphere: the command and obedience dialectic. In the second part, I turn to the concept of exception as this emerges in Jasper's writing on truth, and his lectures on Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. I discuss the significance of Jaspers' discussion of the exception in relation to truth and communication. I then turn to the concept of exception as it emerges in Kierkegaard's book *Fear and Trembling*, in which the "revelational" character of the exception emerges in God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his son, introducing a "leap of faith" that cannot be understood apart from the commanding divine-obedient disciple relationship. I argue that key features from Kierkegaard's Protestant account of exception are found in Schmitt, before critically analysing Schmitt's use of Kierkegaard in *Political Theology* and considering the limits of Kierkegaard for Jaspers. In the final section, I introduce Kierkegaard's mode of "indirect communication" to consider whether Kierkegaard's concept of exception offer a positive political moment that challenges Schmitt's strong sovereignty. Here I suggest that "indirect communication" offers a way of "thinking in view of the exception, without the exception" in line with Jaspers, which frees the concept of exception from a Schmittian faith in sovereignty, and potentially contributes towards Vatter's project of developing a political theology without sovereignty.

EXCEPTION IN THE VIEW OF REVELATION: COMMAND AND OBEDIENCE (VIA SCHMITT)

Carl Schmitt's central concept of exception is found in the famous opening sentence of *Political Theology* (1922): "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception."⁷ Here, Schmitt defines the exception in terms of the decisive sovereign. This is the most frequently cited definition of the exception. Yet this is not the full account of Schmitt's concept of the state of exception in *Political Theology*. Schmitt in fact appears to give a variety of definitions through his attempts to describe the

⁷ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 5.

exception in distinctive ways.⁸ Further, as noted by Vatter, in defining the exception (in relation to public law), Schmitt draws on explicit theological terms.⁹ Thus, in the third chapter of *Political Theology*, Schmitt states that the “exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology.”¹⁰ Little more is said about this in this passage, Schmitt declaring that “[a] detailed presentation of the meaning of the concept of the miracle in this context will have to be left to another time.”¹¹ Bonnie Honig in *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy* devotes a chapter to the place of miracle in the state of exception. She provides a definition when she argues that for Schmitt, “the miracle on which the exception is modelled is an interruptive force that suspends the ordinary lawfulness of the world and thereby exhibits divine power and sovereignty.”¹² This suggests that, for Schmitt, a central feature of the miracle is the interruption of the everyday, of the suspension of the regulative function of the law.¹³

A further definition of the exception emerges when Schmitt quotes Kierkegaard (not by name):

The exception [*Ausnahme*] explains the general [*Allgemeine*] and itself. And if one wants to study the general correctly, one only needs to look around for a true exception. It reveals everything more clearly than does the general. Endless talk about the general becomes boring; there are exceptions. If they cannot be explained, then the general also cannot be explained. The difficulty is usually not noticed because the general is not thought about with passion but with a comfortable superficiality. The exception, on the other hand, thinks the general with intense passion.¹⁴

The quote is from Kierkegaard's work *Repetition*. Schmitt's use of Kierkegaard suggests that the concept of exception is necessary in order to be able to apprehend or understand the general appropriately. That is, the exception “explains” the meaning of the general, as well as itself. The exception is here also characterised as exhibiting “intense passion.” Just prior to the Kierkegaard quote, Schmitt states that, “[i]n the exception the power of real-life breaks through the crust of a mechanism that has become torpid by repetition.”¹⁵ As such, the exception appears as a power that returns life, vitality and energy in a civilisation that has become stagnant.¹⁶ This more positive view of the exception appears at odds with the more conservative view

⁸ See Petra Brown, *Bonhoeffer: God's Conspirator in a State of Exception* (Springer, 2019).

⁹ Vatter, *Divine Democracy*, 29.

¹⁰ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36.

¹¹ Schmitt, 37.

¹² Bonnie Honig, *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press 2009), 94.

¹³ Brown, *Bonhoeffer: God's Conspirator*, 81.

¹⁴ Kierkegaard cited in Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 15.

¹⁵ Schmitt, 15.

¹⁶ Schmitt, 15.

of the exception that Schmitt is held to espouse, i.e., the exception as a threat that requires the sovereign decision. Here the exception is described as life giving or life affirming in some way. It aligns with the nature of the miracle, which is disruptive but not necessarily destructive. The exception understood in the context of political theology holds open the possibility of the exception as the revelational event.

Schmitt's use of political theology is somewhat puzzling. On the one hand, he draws on the concept of revelation or the miracle, arguing that this is required to legitimise authority and sovereignty, thereby guaranteeing the rule of law. On the other hand, he also describes political theology as having a scientific character: "all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts."¹⁷ As Vatter notes, Schmitt's approach has led to two opposing tendencies in contemporary scholarship: some see Schmitt's writings on political science and jurisprudence as independent from his political theology; others argue Schmitt's political theology (including his anti-liberalism and anti-Judaism) influences his entire oeuvre.¹⁸ Heinrich Meier is explicit regarding Schmitt's theological commitments as the basis of his political theology, arguing that the jurist's position presupposes "*faith* in the truth of revelation. It subordinates everything to revelation and traces everything back to it."¹⁹ Key to Schmitt's concept of revelation, in Meier's view, is a powerful either/or as the hearer is confronted with a decision, "between either God or Satan, friend or enemy, good or evil."²⁰ Rather than remain in contemplation, the hearer must respond with either obedience or disobedience to the external command that "is given from outside."²¹ For Meier at least, Schmitt stands on the side of revelation, authority, and obedience.

Despite the open question regarding his own theological commitments, by aligning sovereignty and the exception with the theological concept of revelation, Schmitt introduces sovereignty as a fundamentally disruptive force, as a breaking through of repetitive and predictable processes that represent the order of the *nomos*, the "first measure of all subsequent measures" and the "mother of law."²² As Vatter points out, for Schmitt, the rule of law depends on the authority of the sovereign whose commands are taken *as law*.²³ That is, the sovereign is the one who

¹⁷ Schmitt, 36.

¹⁸ Vatter, *Divine Democracy*, 22.

¹⁹ Heinrich Meier, *The Lesson of Carl Schmitt: Four Chapters on the Distinction between Political Theology and Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 20. Italics added.

²⁰ Meier, 16.

²¹ Meier, 16.

²² Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the Internal Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum* (New York: Telos Press, 2003), 67, 48.

²³ Vatter, *Divine Democracy*, 3. Italics added.

declares the state of exception as a result of being himself an exception. In declaring the exception, the sovereign is also revealed as an exception, and the uttered command can be responded to only by its corollary – obedience by those who hear the command. For this reason, I think Meier is right in his reading of Schmitt, though I disagree that the revelational event is necessarily characterised by a command-obedience structure, as we will come to see through Jaspers.

EXCEPTION IN THE VIEW OF REVELATION AND REASON: COMMUNICATION (VIA JASPERS)

So far, we have seen that Schmitt's concept of exception in *Political Theology* emerges in connection with the question of political sovereignty and the theological concept of revelation, with a distinctive Kierkegaardian influence. In the following section, I turn to Jaspers's account of the exception as it emerges in his 1930s writing, including *Existenzphilosophie* (1938), in which Jaspers discusses the exception on relation to truth, and the lecture "Vernunft und Existenz" (1935), where Jaspers connects the exception to Kierkegaard.

First then to Jaspers' discussion of truth in connection to the exception. For Jaspers, the exception symbolises a "primal truth," which challenges "universality with its tendency to become fixed," whilst authority is the expression of truth in "historic form to counteract the arbitrary multiplicity of opinion and will."²⁴ For Jaspers, we can make sense of the exception as "primal truth" only in its historic concreteness. But as we attempt to do so, we are simultaneously repelled; Jaspers' provocatively describes the exception as "a lighthouse where the roads end, illuminating the universal from the situation of the non-universal."²⁵ That is, we see the truth only from the perspective of human experience in time. As a result, "[t]he exception, by its actuality, destroys truth as permanent and universally valid. And authority, by its actuality, gags every particular truth claiming absolute autonomy."²⁶

Thus, truth is not one, in Jaspers's account.²⁷ Instead, truth has a "plurality of meanings" where each has an appropriate sphere.²⁸ In each of its modes of expression, truth is "characterised by him who speaks in it at any time."²⁹ On this

²⁴ Jaspers, *Karl Jaspers: Basic Philosophical Writings*, 247.

²⁵ Jaspers, 247.

²⁶ Jaspers, 246.

²⁷ Jaspers, 253.

²⁸ These modes of truth for Jaspers characterised as pragmatic truth that aims towards usefulness in practice, as valid truth that aims towards correct validity and cogency, truth as conviction that aims towards confirmation or a sense of self-completeness, and truth as faith. The latter appears beyond pragmatic, demonstrable and self-completing ideas of truth, and emerges as "authentic consciousness of actuality" that returns to the world from an experience of transcendence. Jaspers, 253.

²⁹ Jaspers, 243.

basis, truth that emerges through the experience of exception and authority provides the condition for communication, or communicative reason. This means that truth itself does not have the character of “sovereignty” in a Schmittian sense as understood in a command/obedience dialectic. Indeed, in Jaspers’ view, wherever the command appears, communicative reason retreats. Jaspers suggestively notes that in the context of command “conversation is either conflict or expression of an identity of interests [...] [using] cunning against the enemy and against the possible enemy in the friend.”³⁰ Thus, Jaspers critiques Schmitt’s concept of sovereignty as command, precisely at the point where Schmitt would defend it – as necessitated by the friend-enemy relation.³¹

In communicative reason, truth is encountered in plurality, but truth is also the limit experience that connects us to what is “non-identical” and is therefore singular, through the act of speaking. We can see here a connection between Schmitt and Jaspers, in their accounts of the exception as related to the singularity of the one who speaks. But whereas Schmitt connects the exception with the proclamation of the (singular) sovereign, Jaspers connects it to the speech of every individual. Indeed, Thornhill describes Jaspers as “close to the more pro-democratic aspects of Carl Schmitt’s thinking in the late 1920s” without being drawn to Schmitt’s anti-democratic conclusions.³² We could say that both Schmitt and Jaspers connect truth with exception and authority in human experience. However, for Schmitt this is the basis for strong sovereignty in a command/obedience dialectic, while for Jaspers, exception and authority signal the need to *refuse* the command. For Jaspers, speech signals “an eternally unfinished event” in which the human being “become[s] truthful through the spoken disclosure of a relation to their ideas”³³

As with Schmitt, Jaspers also draws on the concept of revelation or faith, but he does so in relation to truth, where both point to the “formal limit of human cognition.”³⁴ But in Jaspers’ case, revelation that breaks into the world shares the characteristic of truth, establishing the possibility of communication. For Jaspers, *both* philosophical belief and belief in revelation recognise authority “cannot be disproved nor proven by reasoned arguments.”³⁵ Proceeding from the limit of human cognition is important, for it establishes both philosophy and revelation as exercises “of communicative reason, where the reasons of both parts are listened to in equal ways,” writes Vatter.³⁶ Consider the contrast with Schmitt, who desires to

³⁰ Jaspers, 244.

³¹ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 26.

³² Chris Thornhill, *Karl Jaspers: Politics and Metaphysics* (Taylor and Francis, 2013), 168.

³³ Thornhill, 10-11.

³⁴ Thornhill, 129.

³⁵ Jaspers cited in Thornhill, 130.

³⁶ Vatter, *Divine Democracy*, 223.

reduce the multiplicity of revelation (and with this the plurality of humanity on the earth) into the either/or that separates Athens from Jerusalem, revelation from reason, and the friend from the enemy, at least according to Meier.

Finally, as with Schmitt, Jaspers' concept of exception is influenced by Kierkegaard. In a 1935 lecture, Jaspers describes both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard as regarding themselves as "being representatives of their time but as the exception that causes scandal and offense."³⁷ Both have "in common a historical judgement about their time' that responds to 'impending nothingness,' while retaining knowledge of what has been lost: "through their thinking they want to make something happen, the nature of which they cannot foresee with any certainty [...]. As both of them face their own epoch, they are gripped by the question: what will become of man?"³⁸ Like Kierkegaard, Jaspers argues that "intellectual authenticity' is grounded in 'human uncertainty, crisis and lived possibility,'" and both Jaspers and Kierkegaard attempt to "unite reflexivity and experience in the personal and unique choices of subjective agency" that form a "vital reflection" that escapes objectifying forms of reason, suggests Thornhill.³⁹ Thus, in Jaspers' account, Kierkegaard views *himself* as an "exception," precisely because of his willingness to live in a context of crisis, or uncertainty, which for Jaspers' shows the importance of subjective agency that is willing to critically reflect on the limits of reason within the human condition.

EXCEPTION IN VIEW OF ABRAHAM: INCOMMUNICABILITY (VIA KIERKEGAARD)

The concept of exception appears in three early texts of Kierkegaard's, *Either/Or*, *Fear and Trembling*, and *Repetition*, all published in 1843. This section focuses on the concept of exception as it appears in *Fear and Trembling*, where the "revelational" character of the exception emerges in Kierkegaard's exploration of God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his son.⁴⁰ Kierkegaard invokes the concept of exception in relation to Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac from a philosophical perspective (the perspective of reason) to ask whether it constitutes an acceptable "teleological suspension" of ethics. This is another way to ask whether

³⁷ Jaspers, *Karl Jaspers: Basic Philosophical Writings*, 41.

³⁸ Jaspers, 42.

³⁹ Thornhill, *Karl Jaspers: Politics and Metaphysics*, 120-121.

⁴⁰ Kierkegaard's interpretation of the Akedah should not be taken as faithful to the Biblical account. Rather, it is part of a multilayered personal and public form of communication. See Brown, *Bonhoeffer: God's Conspirator*, 139.

God's command provides a higher law than existing ethical duties as these are understood in social contexts.⁴¹

As Westphal points out, Abraham's act is baffling when viewed from the perspective of society:

[Society's] highest requirements are the needs of the nation, the state, and society; and these needs prevail over the otherwise protected needs of the family. But no larger social need motivates or justifies Abraham, whose society only asks that he love and protect his son.⁴²

Because Abraham cannot appeal to a higher duty such as the greater good, Kierkegaard argues that the test is a "private endeavour," which lacks any ethical or universal justification.⁴³ Kierkegaard starkly informs the reader that the command to sacrifice Isaac is a test in which Abraham must learn that his duty simply consists in doing God's will.⁴⁴

It is significant that God's command cannot be heard/understood by those around Abraham. Kierkegaard seems to suggest that Abraham's higher good is determined by his relationship to God, a God who communicates in a way that is private and inaccessible to any other person, *and* who commands Abraham to an act of violence against his own son, thereby transgressing the highest ethical law available to him, his parental duty. It is the sense of a divinely sanctioned transgression that makes of Abraham an exception. *Fear and Trembling* refers to faith as "the paradox of existence" that "makes murder into a holy and God-pleasing act, a paradox that gives Isaac back to Abraham again, which no thought can grasp, because faith begins precisely where thought stops."⁴⁵ Given Kierkegaard's warning that "no thought" can grasp Abraham's faith, presumably faith is precisely a category that cannot be thought or rationalised. This is the "leap of faith" with which Kierkegaard is characteristically associated.

Recall now that Schmitt's "revelational" exception is characterised by a command/obedience dialectic. As such, the exception that emerges from Schmitt's *Political Theology* resembles the dynamic between God's command and Abraham's silent obedience in *Fear and Trembling*.⁴⁶ Stanley Hauerwas argues that

⁴¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1983, 55-67.

⁴² Merold Westphal, "Kierkegaard and Hegel," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, edited by Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 109.

⁴³ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, 59.

⁴⁴ Kierkegaard, 60.

⁴⁵ Kierkegaard, 47, 53.

⁴⁶ As Löschenkohl notes, "it would seem obvious for Schmitt's exception to be related to the decisionist approach to the exception, explored in *Fear and Trembling*." Birte Löschenkohl,

“the metaphor of command” is central to Protestant thought as it seeks to counteract a “righteousness of works” theology that envisions human participation in the salvation process.⁴⁷ The Protestant salvation story highlights “the vertical dimension of transcendence, not the horizontal dimension of everyday life,” and subsequently can lend itself to “easily seem occasional and ephemeral,” suggests Hauerwas.⁴⁸ The Protestant individual in this context is “in crisis” in the “absence of general or universal principles that have some objectivity.”⁴⁹ We can see this sense of crisis exemplified in *Fear & Trembling*, in God’s demand that Abraham sacrifice his son. We can also see it in Jaspers’ description of Kierkegaard as one who lives as an exception in the face of uncertainty and crisis. While it’s important to avoid generalised statements about Protestant theology that ignore the specific trajectories emerging from early Reformers such as Luther and Calvin, it is nevertheless useful, from a philosophical perspective, to characterise Protestant theology as a form of monotheistic voluntarism that shapes a unique view of political theology.⁵⁰

Schmitt suggestively refers to Kierkegaard as the last great Protestant theologian.⁵¹ The influence of (Protestant) vertical transcendence as described by Hauerwas and explored by Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling*, also finds its way into Schmitt’s *Political Theology*, particularly his concept of sovereignty, which reflects the nature of God’s radically free will, associated with the divine (Protestant) command. And just as Kierkegaard draws attention to the place of “silence” in Abraham’s obedience to God’s command, so I suggest silence plays an important role in Schmitt’s *Political Theology*. The sovereign who declares the state of exception is proved sovereign precisely by refusing to enter into further debate. Schmitt attacks liberalism for its insistence on “negotiation,” which he declared is “a cautious half measure, in the hope that the definitive dispute, the decisive bloody battle, can be transformed into a parliamentary debate and permit the decision to

"Occasional Decisiveness: Exception, Decision and Resistance in Kierkegaard and Schmitt," *European Journal of Political Theory* 18, no. 1 (2019): 89-107.

⁴⁷ Hauerwas cited R.R. Reno, “Stanley Hauerwas,” in *Wiley Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, eds. William T. Cavanaugh and Peter Manley Scott., (Newark: John Wiley & Sons Incorporated, 2019), 308.

⁴⁸ Reno, *Stanley Hauerwas*, 308. See J. Daryl Charles, *Retrieving the Natural Law: A Return to Moral First Things* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 2008) for a similar critique of Protestantism’s relation to ethics.

⁴⁹ James M. Gustafson, *Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 73.

⁵⁰ Anver M. Emon, “Beyond the Protestantism of Political Theology: Thinking the Politics of Theological Voluntarism,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 29, no. 2 (May 1, 2016): 190-203, 192.

⁵¹ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 15.

be suspended forever in an everlasting discussion.”⁵² As I’ve suggested elsewhere, it would appear that for Schmitt, sovereignty demonstrates its authority by refusing to be persuaded by argument or reason.⁵³ For Schmitt, the basis of political life is the (revelational) command, and the (unquestionable) authority of the sovereign. This gives rise to the command-obedience dialectic in political life, in Schmitt’s account. Schmitt develops “a politics of obedience” that parallels “the obedience of voluntarist theology,”⁵⁴ and therefore the command-obedience dialectic that belongs to faith in Kierkegaard’s account will find itself mirrored in Schmitt’s account of the exception.

The account of the exception in *Fear & Trembling* would suggest that Kierkegaard’s existential philosophy is amenable to a form of Schmittian political theology. But this conclusion would be incorrect. Kierkegaard’s response to the radical exception explored in *Fear & Trembling* emerges in *Repetition*, which was actually the text used by Schmitt in order to argue *for* the exception. While the quote from *Repetition* in Schmitt’s *Political Theology* suggests a radically isolated concept of exception, this is not the case in the original passage. Schmitt quotes the passage as though it is one coherent section, when it is in fact constituted of two separate passages. The missing part in Schmitt’s quote is italicized below:

[T]he exception explains the universal and himself, and if one really wants to study the universal, one only needs to look around for a legitimate exception; he discloses everything much more clearly than the universal itself. *The legitimate exception is reconciled in the universal [...]* Eventually one grows weary of the incessant chatter about the universal and the universal repeated to the point of the most boring insipidity. There are exceptions.⁵⁵

The key phrase that Schmitt overlooked is that the legitimate exception is reconciled in the universal (in italics). A number of Kierkegaardian scholars have commented specifically on Schmitt’s selective use of Kierkegaard in *Political Theology*, variously suggesting Schmitt’s reading of Kierkegaard has an “event-character,” that Schmitt inappropriately applies the concept of exception “in public practice,” thereby transforming “Kierkegaard’s project of egalitarian inwardness before God into a political philosophy of the totalitarian state.”⁵⁶ Rebecca Gould

⁵² Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 63. This is immediately followed by the observation that “[d]ictatorship is the opposite of discussion.”

⁵³ Brown, *Bonhoeffer: God’s Conspirator*, 90.

⁵⁴ Emon, “Beyond the Protestantism of Political Theology,” 198, 197.

⁵⁵ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, 227.

⁵⁶ Burkhard, “Kierkegaard’s Moment,” 157-158; Bartholomew Ryan, *Kierkegaard’s Indirect Politics: Interludes with Lukács, Schmitt, Benjamin and Adorno* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2014), 92-93; Stephen Backhouse, *Kierkegaard’s Critique of National Socialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 24; Barry Stocker, *Kierkegaard on Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 17.

argues that the full passage shows that, unlike Schmitt, Kierkegaard “seeks to preserve the antinomy between exception and norm. In order for exception to be oppositional and to function as a critique of the norm, it must be aberrant.”⁵⁷ Thus, while Schmitt uses Kierkegaard to support his own account of political sovereignty in relation to the exception, the account of exception presented in *Fear and Trembling* is revisited in *Repetition*, in a paragraph that was selectively edited by Schmitt to support his own more radical account.

Yet, Kierkegaard’s overall view of faith remains problematic, as indicated by Jasper’s critical stance towards his work, whose subject remains enclosed in its “reflexive lonely religiosity,” incommunicable to self and other, and therefore unable to provide an account of “thinking existence” or “existential reason.”⁵⁸ For Jasper’s Kierkegaard’s concept of exception is presented as “absolute incommunicable truth [...] in which no one could share” and in Jasper’s view this “would be as if [the exception] [...] did not exist at all. For his communicability is a condition of his existence for us.”⁵⁹ Unlike Kierkegaard’s Abraham in *Fear & Trembling*, Jaspers suggests that the exception through communication “always returns to the universal,” and it is reason’s relation to the exception that makes “authentic communication” possible because it seeks also to communicate, “to turn toward everything that is capable of expression” and to preserve its communicability.⁶⁰ According to Thornhill, Jaspers turned against the “radical exceptionalism” proposed by both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, seeking to reintegrate “human isolation and alienation into a communicative, other-oriented” and “historical, binding orders of common life.”⁶¹ Yet, I suggest that even if Jaspers is correct regarding Kierkegaard’s subject as “lonely” in his or her faith, the possibility of communication also appears in Kierkegaard’s wider authorship. As we have now seen Jasper’s insistence that the exception returns to the universal, is also present in Kierkegaard’s writing, specifically in *Repetition*, where he describes the legitimate exception as reconciled in the universal. Thus, both Schmitt’s account of exception as sovereign command, and Jaspers’ account of exception as the basis for communication, can be found in Kierkegaard’s exploration of the exception. But depending on which text is prioritised, one ends up with the Schmittian account

⁵⁷ Rebecca Gould, “Laws, Exceptions, Norms: Kierkegaard, Schmitt, and Benjamin on the Exception,” *Telos* 2013, no. 162 (March 20, 2013): 77-96, 81. Gould points to all of Kierkegaard’s early pseudonymous writing, particularly in 1843 as fluctuating around the concepts of exception and norms, this includes *Either/Or*, *Fear and Trembling* and *Repetition*. Similarly, Conrad Burkhard argues that the missing sentence indicates that for Kierkegaard, “the exception is dialectically bound to the norm, to normality and generality.” Burkhard, “Kierkegaard’s Moment,” 158.

⁵⁸ Thornhill, *Karl Jaspers: Politics and Metaphysics*, 123-124.

⁵⁹ Jaspers, *Karl Jaspers: Basic Philosophical Writings*, 247-248.

⁶⁰ Jaspers, 180.

⁶¹ Thornhill, *Karl Jaspers: Politics and Metaphysics*, 18.

of exception as demanding silent obedience, via *Fear and Trembling*, or an account more amenable to critical reflection and communication, precisely by returning to the universal, via *Repetition*.

EXCEPTION IN VIEW OF KIERKEGAARD: INDIRECT COMMUNICATION

While the exploration of Schmitt and Jaspers in relation to Kierkegaard and the exception is undoubtedly of intellectual interest, I want to return to the Vatter's project in *Divine Democracy*, where he seeks to develop a political theology without sovereignty. In this final section, I will suggest that Kierkegaard's mode of authorship and communication may provide a model for political engagement in ways that disrupt totalising political structures, particularly as these might be rooted in claims to sovereignty aligned with states of exception.

Kierkegaard described his own mode of writing as "indirect communication," reflected in his pseudonymous authorship, including both *Fear and Trembling*, and *Repetition*. For Kierkegaard, indirect communication served to isolate the individual into a state of critical reflection, where the readers is made "aware of the religious, the essentially Christian," yet in such way that Kierkegaard himself wrote as one "without authority ... as a reader of the books, not as the author."⁶² Thus, while Kierkegaard confronts his readers with an either/or claim in relation to revelation and faith, the use of pseudonyms such as Johannes De Silentio (*Fear & Trembling*), or Constantin Constantius (*Repetition*), leave the reader free to make a decision in relation to their *own* faith.

There is, in addition to making room *for* faith, also a political dimension latent within the Kierkegaard's mode of communication. Ryan Bartholomew describes Kierkegaard's authorship as unsettling human beings so that:

people become more self-aware of themselves as individuals formed by their own decisions, [...] [which] may lead them to also more radically question the structures of authority which often seek to mask human autonomy, namely the state and certain kinds of dogmatic political forms.⁶³

For Bartholomew, this means Kierkegaard can be seen to develop a form of "indirect politics," or "a negative space" through "the gap or interlude" that makes room for "the exception" in Kierkegaard's writing.⁶⁴ Indirect politics that emerges from indirect communication helps to "dissolve the boundaries and develop an

⁶² Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, ed. Edna H. Hong and Howard V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

⁶³ Ryan, *Kierkegaard's Indirect Politics*, 2.

⁶⁴ Ryan, *Kierkegaard's Indirect Politics*, 1.

entirely new framework within which to rethink the act of political praxis.”⁶⁵ Stephen Backhouse similarly argues that Kierkegaard’s thinking provides “a political space for the marginalized person disenfranchised by the totalizing narrative claims of the established order.”⁶⁶ Kierkegaard as offering a political theology that resists the established order is echoed by Saitya Brata Das, who argues Kierkegaard presents “an exception without sovereignty,” with a demand that “the worldly order must be emptied (*kenosis*) of all sovereignty.”⁶⁷ For Das, the Protestant theology of Kierkegaard and the political theology of Schmitt are both concerned with the transcendence of exception/the exception of transcendence that lies rooted in the Judeo-Christian eschatological themes as secularised in modernity, but they arrive at very different views regarding the role of sovereignty in modernity. Frawing attention to the political potential in *Repetition*, Birte Löschenkohl notes that the latter enables a shift “from thinking the exception as a *state of exception*, a concept that mostly concerns state politics, to thinking about an *exception from the state* that struggles with and resists hegemonic forces from below.”⁶⁸ Thus, Kierkegaard can be read to provide an account of *resistance* to political sovereignty of the kind promoted by Schmitt.

Returning to Abraham in *Fear and Trembling*, we can now more clearly consider Kierkegaard’s account of Abraham’s silent faith as a mode of *indirect communication*. It represents what Jaspers calls “thinking in view of the exception without being an exception,” which Jaspers suggests reflected the philosophy of both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. It echoes Jaspers’ metaphor of the lighthouse that illuminates the universal from the perspective of the non-universal, or a capacity to see the “counter-rational rationally,” recognising that this is “the ground on which we ourselves stand.”⁶⁹ For Vatter, this describes “post-metaphysical thinking as a philosophical approach to the priority of faith over knowledge.”⁷⁰ Participating in the task of seeing the counter-rational rationally is another way of affirming truth as plurality. Such communication would point to the limit of an overly determined form of political life, as shaped by a discourse of command-obedience that accompanies discussions of claims to strong sovereignty. Seeing the counter-rational rationally prioritises communication as an ethical norm of public discourse in a way that is attentive to what may emerge beyond what is known or accepted as truth or fact. This can include an ear tuned towards voices often excluded or “silenced” within totalizing political narratives or claims to order. When silence remains connected to speech, it is not the same as the silence that responds to the command. The command forecloses speech, precisely by requiring only obedience. Silence that remains connected to speech is an important part of political life, and our capacity to be

⁶⁵ Ryan 1.

⁶⁶ Backhouse, *Kierkegaard’s Critique of National Socialism*, 23-24.

⁶⁷ Saitya Brata Das, *Political Theology of Kierkegaard* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 8-9, 14.

⁶⁸ Löschenkohl, *Occasional Decisiveness*, 91.

⁶⁹ Jaspers, *Karl Jaspers: Basic Philosophical Writings*, 51-52.

⁷⁰ Vatter, *Divine Democracy*, 220.

open to listening to others who may yet speak in ways that we cannot foresee or even understand.

CONCLUSION

This paper began by introducing two thinkers on the exception that emerge in *Divine Democracy* but are not closely connected in Vatter's project. I explored key ideas by Schmitt and Jaspers on the concept of exception in relation to communication, revelation and Kierkegaard. We have seen that Schmitt and Jaspers ultimately present very different outcomes to their analysis of the concept of exception. Democracy ends, as Schmitt well understood, with the concept of sovereignty expressed in the command/obedience relationship. It perhaps ironic that Schmitt, the most well-known political theologian of the exception, was himself unable to maintain openness to it. For Schmitt, the appearance of the exception grounds divine sovereignty that demands obedience and forecloses communication, while for Jaspers the appearance of the exception requires space for speech and communication. Schmitt rejects liberalism as the project of "everlasting discussion" that evades the political, while for Jaspers communication *is* the life of politics, and it is the only way to counter "epistemological authoritarianism."⁷¹ In this paper, I have suggested that Kierkegaard's concept of exception introduces silence in two modes: as obedience to God in faith, but also as a mode of "indirect communication" that remains open to the communicability of the experience of the exception. This makes an important contribution to modern democracies, particularly when "acts of faith are precisely the most widespread communicative tokens in the world," as Vatter suggests.⁷² Kierkegaard's mode of indirect communication, and the potential for indirect politics as part of this mode, aligns with Jaspers, who Vatter writes, held "on to the post-Kierkegaardian goal of unifying faith and reason in such a way that it does not sideline faith nor the authority of revelation."⁷³ More explicitly connecting faith as "communicative tokens" with philosophy and political life, Vatter writes:

Philosophical faith and faith in divine revelation can coexist not by reducing the multiplicity into one (mystical) Person representing humanity, but rather by disseminating radically the faith in the One (God) into the irreducible human multitude.⁷⁴

⁷¹ The latter is a term attributed to Cooke, in a footnote in Vatter, 191n7.

⁷² Vatter, 187.

⁷³ Vatter, 195.

⁷⁴ Vatter, 225.

This paper has contributed to Vatter's project by drawing attention to the concept of exception in Kierkegaard's writing, and the political potential in Kierkegaard's own method of 'indirect communication' as a way of remaining alert and attentive to diverse and often marginalised voices in public discourse. In so doing, I have necessarily engaged with only select passages from relevant chapters. I have therefore not been able to do full justice to the overall argument or purpose of *Divine Democracy*. However, I believe I have drawn attention to an important figure in contemporary discussion on political theology, a figure mentioned only in passing in *Divine Democracy*. Kierkegaard's mode of indirect communication has much to contribute to efforts to develop a "democratic political theology" without claims to sovereignty. The place of silence and listening in this process takes us away from the command/obedience structure of sovereignty, to open up a space for "indirect politics" that resists and challenges overarching claims of political order precisely by introducing an opportunity for critical reflection.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Brown, Petra. *Bonhoeffer: God's Conspirator in a State of Exception*. Springer, 2019.
- Backhouse, Stephen. *Kierkegaard's Critique of Christian Nationalism*. Oxford Theological Monograph. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Burkhard, Conrad. "Kierkegaard's Moment: Carl Schmitt and His Historical Concept of Decision." In *Redescriptions: Yearbook of Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory*, 145-71. Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2009.
- Emmanuel, Steven M. *Kierkegaard and the Concept of Revelation*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1996.
- Honig, Bonnie. *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009.
- Charles, J. Daryl. *Retrieving the Natural Law: A Return to Moral First Things*. Michigan: Eerdmans, 2008.
- Emon, Anver M. "Beyond the Protestantism of Political Theology: Thinking the Politics of Theological Voluntarism." *Studies in Christian Ethics* 29, no. 2 (May 1, 2016): 190-203. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0953946815623136>.
- Gould, Rebecca. "Laws, Exceptions, Norms: Kierkegaard, Schmitt, and Benjamin on the Exception." *Telos* 2013, no. 162 (March 20, 2013): 77-96. <https://doi.org/10.3817/0313162077>.
- Gustafson, James M. *Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1978.
- Jaspers, Karl. *Karl Jaspers: Basic Philosophical Writings*. Edited by Edith Erlich, Leonard H. Erlich, and George B. Pepper. Atlantic Heights, 1994.
- Kierkegaard. *Fear and Trembling/Repetition. Kierkegaard's Writings*, edited by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.

Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Point of View*. Translated by Edna H. Hong and Howard V. Hong. Edited by Edna H. Hong and Howard V. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.

Löschenkohl, Birte. "Occasional Decisiveness: Exception, Decision and Resistance in Kierkegaard and Schmitt." *European Journal of Political Theory* 18, no. 1 (2019): 89-107.

Meier, Heinrich. *The Lesson of Carl Schmitt: Four Chapters on the Distinction between Political Theology and Political Philosophy*. Translated by Marcus Brainard. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

Reno, R.R. "Stanley Hauerwas." In *Wiley Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, edited by William T. Cavanaugh and Peter Manley Scott. Newark: John Wiley & Sons Incorporated, 2019.

Ryan, Bartholomew. *Kierkegaard's Indirect Politics: Interludes with Lukács, Schmitt, Benjamin and Adorno*. Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2014.

Schmitt, Carl. *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. Translated by George Schwab. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Schmitt, Carl. *The Concept of the Political*. Translated by George Schwab. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996 (1932).

Schmitt, Carl. *The Nomos of the Earth in the Internal Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*. Translated by G.L. Ulmen. New York: Telos Press, 2003.

Stocker, Barry. *Kierkegaard on Politics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Thornhill, Chris. *Karl Jaspers: Politics and Metaphysics*. Taylor and Francis, 2013.

Vatter, Miguel. *Divine Democracy: Political Theology after Carl Schmitt*. Oxford University Press, 2021.

Westphal, Merold. "Kierkegaard and Hegel." In *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, edited by Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino, 101-24. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.