

PROBLEMATISING THEISM: MIGUEL VATTER, AN-ARCHE, AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This essay addresses the complexity of the politics-religion nexus. I use the work of Miguel Vatter as my primary source as well as concepts from Michel Foucault's conceptual toolbox. Specifically, the essay consists of three analytical moves, which relate in turn to theism, Vatter's political theology, and an-arche. First, historically, versions of theism have been embraced, implicitly and explicitly, as an ultimate referent, legitimising hegemonic political practices. To analyse this, then, I employ a *dispositif* of Western Christian theism. As a preliminary step, however, I use the work of Kojève on atheism to understand better the character of theism as *separation* (e.g., not of this world). That is, I use the idea of theism as separation to develop the *dispositif*. Second, I am interested in the political theology of Vatter. I analyse themes and concepts in his work, which culminates in a renewed appreciation of the concept and the practice of an-arche (no rule). This entails situating and analysing Vatter's *Divine Democracy* within the context of the overall trajectory of his work. Third, using Schürmann, I begin to develop the concept of an-arche as a potential counter to hegemonic politics. In this context, while an-arche subverts entrenched certainties, it also opens new possibilities.

KEYWORDS

Foucault, Kojève, Schürmann, theism, *dispositif*, an-arche

Miguel Vatter opens *Divine Democracy* with the following question:

Political theology is a discourse developed in the 20th century that looks back on a millennial history in which western societies tightly interwove religion and politics, as political rulers sought support in religion and religions pursued political power. Have we left this past behind because we are now living in a secular age?¹

The short answer is no. Politics and religion remain deeply enmeshed. To analyse this, I employ a *dispositif* of Western Christian theism. Subsequently, I argue that Western Christian theism has a dual role in creating and compounding hegemonic politics and practices. Historically, Western Christian theism has

¹ Miguel Vatter, *Divine Democracy: Political Theology after Carl Schmitt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 1.

influenced the subject formation of kings. In a premodern setting, for example, the king “is the saviour of his subjects from their sins by giving them what the Hellenistic world increasingly wanted more than anything else, a dynamic and personal revelation of deity.”² So, the issue is less about separating politics and religion, and more about the nature of that relationship.

It is important to underline the complexity of the politics-religion nexus. In general terms, the word *nexus* captures something of the complex relations between politics and religion. In this context, the *dispositif* of Western Christian theism is a way of problematising theism, addressing complexity, and understanding the dynamic. Of course, there are other factors at play, and more could be said about gender.

Further, I am using the concept of an-arche to critique the hegemony of Western Christian theism. To this end, I am using the work of Miguel Vatter as my primary source, and concepts from Foucault’s conceptual toolbox. The concepts are problematisation and *dispositif*. Furthermore, as I assess Vatter’s work, I concentrate on the relationship between politics and religion, as well as his *theological* discourse and its political implications. By theological discourse, I am not implying Vatter is religious, instead, I analyse key elements in his work. Overall, my approach is historical, philosophical, and political. In many ways, I am putting into practice Habermas’s methodological atheism. Lastly, I explore the meaning of the terms *arche* and *an-arche*. In some instances, I use the more general term *anarchic* to describe the political impact of an-arche. All of this forms the basis of a critique of the *dispositif* of Western Christian theism. In summary, Vatter articulates the political problem of theism in *Divine Democracy*, where “a republican constitution does not need to be underwritten by monotheism (if only in its Trinitarian mode).”³ Subsequently, I build on Vatter’s concept of an-arche to address the political problem of theism.

THE *DISPOSITIF* OF WESTERN CHRISTIAN THEISM

I address four issues here that contribute to the analysis of the *dispositif* of Western Christian theism. First, the concept of theism is related to the importance of origin. Having a sense of origin, especially a divinely authorised origin, justifies

² Erwin Ramsdell Goodenough, “The Political Philosophy of Hellenistic kingship,” in *Yale Classical Studies I* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 91. Also, Alexandre Kojève, *The Notion of Authority: A Brief Presentation*, trans. Hager Weslati (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 4, where he articulates the significance of a divine aspiration where “without realising it, Man projects onto God what he discovers – more or less unconsciously – in himself, in such a way that he can be studied while studying ‘his’ God.” By divine aspiration, I am referring to the relationship between human desire and the divine, which includes leaders who aspire to be seen as gods and followers who want god-like leaders.

³ Vatter, *Divine Democracy*, 256.

hegemonic practices (e.g., appropriation, dispossession). Second, it is important to understand the concept of theism. To this end, I use the work of Kojève on atheism. From this, the umbrella term *separation* emerges as critical to the workings of the *dispositif*. Third, Trinitarian theories have been used to overcome the problem of separation. But the problem is often the (Christological) premises of these theories. Fourth, I use Foucault to establish a working definition of the *dispositif*, which is a way of describing interrelations and framing complexity (e.g., politics and religion). It is important to expand on these four points.

First, in terms of origin, uncertainty about the end (*telos*) lends itself to the construction of divine origin stories, which form us.⁴ That is, a fictive origin reassures us about an uncertain end.⁵ Historically, sovereignty has been bound to this kind of theology. With Anglo-settler movements, for example, there is a colonizing theism. This is an unholy alliance, in the name of God, between merchant, magistrate, parson, soldier, and farmer. All of them were engaged in divinely authorized missions of appropriation (e.g., commerce, law, souls, security, produce). In this context, versions of theism form a metaphysical foundation, sustaining the myth of divine origin, and legitimising hegemonic practices.

Second, in terms of theism, my interest is largely political. Historically, there have been many versions of theism. The concern here is how theism, with its inherent notion of separation, becomes an integral part of the *dispositif* of Western Christian theism. In empirical terms, for example, churches in the West – which have functioned theologically and liturgically based on theism – are now in decline, but the *dispositif* of Western Christian theism still reigns. In fact, the *dispositif* is about the nexus between religion and politics, and it also provides a way of analysing the nexus, where a *dispositif* is “a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble.”⁶

Alexandre Kojève’s essay on atheism is a useful starting point. His essay is like a sophisticated thought experiment. He describes his essay, perhaps excessively, as “a short, incomplete and very superficial exposition.”⁷ But there is more to it than that. In brief, it is a critical analysis of the *traditional* dispute between atheism and theism with a view to justifying the atheist intuition. So, then, Kojève examines a series of familiar concepts and problems. Nevertheless, there is something about the framing of his essay that does not sit right. By framing, I mean how the debate has been set

⁴ Kojève writes that “the pure theist appears necessarily as a ‘monotheist,’ but, of course, not in the sense that God is one (a qualitative category that is not applicable to God) but in the sense that there are not several gods.” Alexandra Kojève, *Atheism*, trans. Jeff Love (New York: Columbia Press, 2018), 9.

⁵ Reiner Schürmann, *Heidegger: On Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy*, trans. Christine-Marie Gros (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 25 cf. 40.

⁶ Michel Foucault, “The Confession of the Flesh” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham and Kate Soper (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 194.

⁷ Kojève, *Atheism*, 121.

up to begin with. I shall return to this issue. For Kojève, however, the debate focuses on the binary of atheism and theism. For him, the binary is a given. In theism, God is holy, other, separate, engaged with the world but not of the world. This God is outside the world. In atheism, by contrast, there is nothing outside the world. In the constraints of the binary, the debate is not expressly religious in nature.⁸ It is about our thinking, and its ontological premises. It is inherently polemical.⁹ On both sides of the debate, Kojève exposes paradoxes and tautologies. Even with his principal concern of atheism, Kojève admits “all considerations of the atheist amount to a tautology.”¹⁰ But why accept the binary of atheism and theism in the first place? Based on the way the debate has been framed, it seems doomed to fail. It is like saying atheism is not theism, and theism is not atheism. In the process, however, Kojève has highlighted an inherent feature of theism, which is separation. Subsequently, I am using the term *separation* to represent a constellation of interconnected factors like verticality, hierarchy, entitlement, and inequity.¹¹

In Greek, *separation* is *krinein*, which is related to *krisis*. Certainly, other words could have been used here as the umbrella term for the constellation (e.g., verticality). Nonetheless, the word *separation* has a distinctive sense of an imposed break or disjunction, instituting a crisis, reflecting the hegemonic impact of Western Christian theism. Let me put this in wider context. My focus is on the English word *separation*, but it is worth noting that *krinein* signified a form of judgment in ancient Greece. The term *krinein* had to do with “the notions of discrimination and adjudication.”¹² This articulates very well the significance of *separation* in Western Christian theism. Subsequently, my aim is to develop an anarchic approach, potentially destabilising the *dispositif* of Western Christian theism with its inherently masculine pre-disposition (God as king; God as father).¹³ Agamben, moreover, identifies the idea of separation as bound to what it means to be religious.¹⁴ It is the idea of setting apart (cf. consecration). However, the question in this essay concerns the relationship between that separation and power-relations. So, questions include: who determines the nature of the separation, who benefits, and who loses? In

⁸ Kojève, 11, 21.

⁹ Kojève, 189n205.

¹⁰ Kojève, 118.

¹¹ For Vatter’s reflections on the vertical, see Miguel Vatter, “Introduction: Crediting God with Sovereignty,” in *Crediting God: Sovereignty and Religion in the Age of Global Capitalism*, ed. Miguel Vatter (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011b), 4.

¹² Bernard E. Harcourt, *Critique and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 155.

¹³ Kojève writes that “The Authority of the Father is the ‘Authority’ of the cause over the effect. But the cause transmits, by definition, its ‘essence’ (or its ‘power’) to the effect. It is therefore natural to accept the *principle of heredity* in the transmission of the Authority of the Father (= cause). This is how the theological theory of Authority has become the theory of *hereditary Monarchy*.” Kojève, *Authority*, 27.

¹⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus? And other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Steven Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009a), 18.

summary, the *dispositif* of Western Christian theism is the locus of our paternal origin, promulgating separation, obedience, and fear, all of which are conducive to the subject formation of fascist and populist strongmen.¹⁵

Third, in the church's practice, the doctrine of the Trinity is more a unifying symbol than a universally accepted metaphysical solution. Generally, there is a raft of unanswered Christological questions underlying the historical development of Trinitarian theories.¹⁶ In practice, many of these theories attempt to address the problem of separation. In other words, they explain the aporetic origin of Christianity. That is, the human and divine are separate, but they are one in Christ. In summary, theism as singularity or multiplicity is premised on separation. Nonetheless, various unresolved problems remain. As Mark Taylor concludes, in "an effort to defend themselves against charges of superstition, atheism, moral laxity, and sedition, Christian apologists recast their beliefs in terms of Greek philosophy as it had been developed primarily in Platonism and Neoplatonism. The result was a conjunction of Christian theology and Platonic philosophy that created tensions that were never completely resolved."¹⁷

Fourth, in terms of method, I am using Foucault's concept of the *dispositif* as a way of reading complexity. In fact, the *dispositif* helps in the delineation of the problematisation. I am also using it to avoid an over reliance on linear historical analysis (e.g., from Constantine and Eusebius to Gregory VII and so on). We need a multifactorial, multilayered approach based on an interlocking relationship between key factors. In Foucauldian fashion, the focus is on the present.

Foucault did not provide a comprehensive view of the *dispositif*. But he provides important indicators. So, here is an overview of the *dispositif*, which will become clearer in due course. To begin, Foucault was interested in the history of rationality and "the rationality intrinsic to the art of government."¹⁸ In fact, he argues that we need to analyse "specific rationalities."¹⁹ With subject formation, for example, a *dispositif* involves the inscription of a particular rationality, which is "a form of power that makes individuals subjects."²⁰ That is, "forms of rationality inscribe

¹⁵ Steven G. Ogden, *Violence, Entitlement, and Politics: A Theology on Transforming the Subject* (London and New York: Routledge, 2022). See chapter 3 for background on fascism, populism, strongmen, and entitlement.

¹⁶ The identity of Jesus is complex. In the first century, identity is partly functional. In the second, the emphasis became increasingly ontological. As Son of God, can Jesus be fully human and fully divine, if the human and divine are separate orders? The doctrine of the Incarnation needed Trinitarian theory.

¹⁷ Mark C. Taylor, *After God* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 142.

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2007), 273.

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power" in *The Essential Foucault*, ed. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (New York: The New Press, 2003a), 128.

²⁰ Foucault, 130.

themselves in practices or systems of practices.”²¹ Further, Foucault describes the *dispositif* as “a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble” consisting of various elements where the “apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements.”²² In my words, a *dispositif* is a way a *framing complexity* consisting of “strategies of relations of forces supporting, and supported by, types of knowledge.”²³ So, understanding the nature of a specific rationality is essential to grasping power/knowledge relations in a range of settings. In theoretical terms, for instance, the concept of *separation* captures an important aspect of the political rationality of Western Christian theism.

This is a working definition of Foucault’s *dispositif*. As a contrast, it is worth considering Agamben and Schürmann. Agamben adds another dimension to the *dispositif*. Specifically, he explores the implications of economic theology. Broadly, this is like Foucault’s pastoral power writ large. For Agamben, *oikonomia* became “an apparatus through which the Trinitarian dogma and the idea of a divine providential governance of the world were introduced into the Christian faith.”²⁴ Ironically, “the fracture that the theologians had sought to avoid by removing it from the plane of God’s being, reappeared in the form of a caesura that separated in Him being and action, ontology and praxis.”²⁵ In summary, Agamben criticises Foucault’s work on the *dispositif*.²⁶ Ironically, Agamben’s study of Foucault is not comprehensive.²⁷ Clearly, Foucault and Agamben had different interests and, hence, different trajectories. Of course, Agamben analyses aspects of Christian practice (e.g., acclamations), which broaden our understanding of the *dispositif*.

Schürmann adds an anarchic dimension to the Foucauldian subject. Specifically, he critiques the subject in Foucault. In the process, Schürmann recognises how Foucault’s work developed over time.²⁸ He makes a contrast between a Foucauldian “transgressive subject” and his “anarchistic subject.”²⁹ Schürmann’s

²¹ Michel Foucault, “Questions of Method” in *Michel Foucault: Power*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley and others (New York: New Press, 2000), 230.

²² Foucault, “The Confessions of the Flesh,” 194.

²³ Foucault, 196.

²⁴ Agamben, “*Apparatus*,” 10.

²⁵ Agamben, 10.

²⁶ Agamben locates his study “in the wake of Michel Foucault’s investigations into the genealogy of governmentality, but, at the same time, it also aims to understand the internal reasons why they failed to be completed”. Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa and Matteo Mandarini (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), xi.

²⁷ Dotan Leshem, *The Origins of Neoliberalism: Modeling the Economy from Jesus to Foucault* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 6-8.

²⁸ Reiner Schürmann, “On Constituting Oneself as an Anarchist Subject,” in *Tomorrow the Manifold: Essays on Foucault, Anarchy, and the Singularization to Come*, ed. Malte Fabian Rauch and Nicholas Schneider, (Zurich: Diaphanes, 2019), 11, 18.

²⁹ Schürmann, 28-29.

reading, however, is not unsympathetic to Foucault.³⁰ Arguably, Schürmann is making an an-archic reading of Foucault, where the difference “between transgressive and anarchistic struggles lies in their respective targets.” Of course, Schürmann’s critique of Foucault is prior to the publication of the latter’s *Collège de France* lectures.³¹ Further, in Foucault’s network of power-relations, power is exercised by managing conduct and the field of possible actions. Forms of counter-conduct are expressions of resistance. So, there is something inherently anarchic about Foucault’s counter-conduct (cf. mystics).

So, then, I am taking a Foucauldian approach to the *dispositif*. The *dispositif* of Western Christian theism encompasses the history, dynamic, and complexity of the politics-religion nexus. In this context, I presume the *dispositif* has shaped and informed the way we see sovereignty. Arguably, for example, strongman politics is about men who would be kings and kings who would be gods. In this sense, theism is more than simply a philosophical model—it is also a constituent part of the politics-religion nexus. Historically, the emergence of the *dispositif* of Western Christian theism (cf. colonialism, capitalism, neoliberalism) means theism, in Schürmann’s schema, became “the ultimate referent.”³² In my work, this divine influence extends beyond the Middle Ages becoming an integral part of the contemporary *dispositif*. Schürmann’s concept of hegemonic fantasm is pertinent here as a “fantasm is hegemonic when an entire culture relies on it as if it provided that in the name of which one speaks and acts.”³³

In summary, the *dispositif* of Western Christian theism includes separation, verticality, hierarchy, divinization, and metaphysical speculation and justification. For clarity, I present them here in sequence. In religious terms, there is a fundamental separation between the finite (human) and the infinite (divine). The theology of the Incarnation, and Trinitarian theories that follow, claim the human and divine are united in one person (remaining separate). The concept of transcendence is also a reminder of that primal separation. Ultimately, the distance is valorised as holy (other). Implicitly, select persons represent the holy, and adulation reifies that separation. Separation, in turn, lends itself to verticality, which is manifested in relationships (e.g., gods over people, clergy over laity).³⁴ By virtue

³⁰ On sexuality, Schürmann (2019:17) recognises *the missing link* here anticipating the publication of Foucault’s *Confessions of the Flesh* (2021).

³¹ Cf. Schürmann’s interest in self-constitution and Foucault’s *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (2005).

³² Reiner Schürmann, *Broken Hegemonies*, trans. Reginald Lilly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 432 cf. 11–12.

³³ Schürmann, 7.

³⁴ Steven G. Ogden, *The Church, Authority, and Foucault: Imagining the Church as an Open Space of Freedom*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2017). In this work, I analyse the nature of power-relations in the church. This includes the valorisation of hierarchy and obedience, as

of verticality, specific people and groups are judged and treated as inferior. This is reinforced by the sanctification of obedience. Verticality, in turn, lends itself to the development of enduring hierarchical structures. In hierarchies, inevitably, the divinization of leaders and leadership takes place. The leader is the exception (prince, bishop, president). Finally, the separation is not only acclaimed, but also, it is rationalized with the development of metaphysical explanations.

MIGUEL VATTER: SOURCES, DISCOURSES, AND TRAJECTORY

In this section, I present Vatter's key concepts, explain them, showing how they contribute to his political-theological trajectory. Literally, a trajectory is the flight path of a projectile. With Vatter, I do not have all the coordinates, but I have enough *to join the dots*, forming the groundwork for the next section on an-arche. In this context, *Divine Democracy* is significant in terms of articulating key aspects of his work, forming the trajectory, and setting the scene for *Living Law* which is a companion piece to *Divine Democracy*.³⁵ The nature of their relationship will be addressed in due course. Clearly, then, Vatter has a longstanding interest in the relationship between politics and religion. This is reflected in his choice of academic sources like Arendt and Habermas.

With Arendt, Vatter concludes that "politics should be thought of as the freedom of life itself."³⁶ What's more, he explores themes in Arendt such as natality, the nature of origins, and the human condition of plurality.³⁷ Vatter, moreover, makes a telling observation about Arendt's work,

All of these possible readings of Arendt's constant reference to *divine creation*, usually ignored by the secondary literature, which fit together with what I called above the 'humanist' interpretation of her political thought. But another reading of *divine creation* in Arendt is also possible, one that fits better with what I have tried to show so far, namely, that Arendt's conception of natality is not 'humanist'.³⁸

In other words, Vatter accentuates a nuance in Arendt, which is "usually ignored." In so doing, he emphasises his interests, which include a repudiation of traditional religion, and the withdrawal of God from politics. Interest in the withdrawal of God is part of Vatter's evolving political theology.

well as the management of pastoral relationships and liturgies, all of which play a role in legitimising church leaders and marginalizing others.

³⁵ Miguel Vatter, *Living Law: Jewish Political Theology from Hermann Cohen to Hannah Arendt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

³⁶ Miguel Vatter, "Natality and Biopolitics in Hanna Arendt," *Revista de Ciencia Política* 26, no. 2 (2006): 138.

³⁷ Vatter, 148n40.

³⁸ Vatter, 156, emphasis added.

Vatter conducts a nuanced reading of Habermas. In the process, he develops themes that surface in his own work, such as the criticisable nature of truth claims,³⁹ methodological atheism,⁴⁰ and “the religious memory of the Shoah.”⁴¹ Particularly important to Vatter’s later work is Habermas’s sensitivity to the post metaphysical age, where “the task of philosophy (‘Athens’)” is “to appropriate religious substance (‘Jerusalem’) by translating it into criticizable truth claims.”⁴² For Habermas, postmetaphysical theology is charged with the work of translation, (abandoning the Lord and keeping the divine). This entails the translation of religious content into philosophical argument, which must be done under conditions of methodological atheism.

Many of Vatter’s interests are crystalized in an introductory chapter he wrote for *Crediting God*. With the rise of religious fundamentalism and sociology of religion’s crisis over its theories about secularization, he writes, we must face “the old-age question of the relation between God and society, or faith and the constitution of community.”⁴³ Vatter concludes that there is “no religious necessity to connect God (or the divine) to the figure of sovereignty; the necessity of this connection is rather a feature of the discourse of political theology.”⁴⁴ Religions, as such, are not political theologies. And resolution of these issues has a lot to do with the nexus between religion and politics. Nevertheless, Vatter is aware of the embedded nature of these problems, where political theology “which is one form in which an internal connection between religion and politics becomes thinkable – depends on the analogy between God and sovereignty, which permits the earthly sovereign to be conceived as the representative of the divine, the lieutenant of God.”⁴⁵

Divine Democracy has a key role in the development of Vatter’s political theology. It begins with a series of questions, like, what will political theology look like in the 21st century? How have the terms of the debate changed? What do we do with theological discourse? And, all the time, the problem of sovereignty is in the background. For Vatter, however, political theology can only be democratic provided “that political theology can discard sovereignty.”⁴⁶ Vatter recognises there are other ways of addressing these issues.⁴⁷ Vatter, however, focuses on the need for democracy to discard sovereignty. Significantly, his work in *Divine Democracy* prepares the way for the development of an-arche (no-rule) in *Living Law*. In sum,

³⁹ Miguel Vatter, “Habermas between Athens and Jerusalem: Public Reason and Atheistic Theology,” *Interpretation: a Journal of Political Philosophy* 38, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 245.

⁴⁰ Vatter, 246, 251.

⁴¹ Vatter, 244, 248-249.

⁴² Vatter, 245.

⁴³ Vatter, *Crediting God*, 1.

⁴⁴ Vatter, 6.

⁴⁵ Vatter, 3.

⁴⁶ Vatter, *Divine Democracy*, 5.

⁴⁷ Vatter, 2n5; 3n7.

the issue here is the problem of democratic legitimacy. In terms of other issues, Vatter addresses divine kingship, church and empire, and the empty throne.⁴⁸ But he does not address gender specifically.

In summary, the study of politics entails attending to the nexus between politics and religion. In this light, I examine Vatter's discourses. Initially, his use of theological discourse is pitched broadly. His analysis of scholars like Arendt (freedom) and Habermas (methodological atheism) augments all this. From the beginning, however, there is also a passionate interest in Jewish thinking and themes (e.g., Moses, Exodus, Torah, Shoah) and "German-Jewish thought."⁴⁹ Furthermore, anarchism is referred to in broad political terms in *Divine Democracy*⁵⁰ and developed philosophically in *Living Law*. Both works complement each other. In summary, Vatter's scholarship is comprehensive, and nuanced. He uses a range of sources. He has diverse interests. Ultimately, he is interested in discerning a "political theology without sovereignty,"⁵¹ which is linked to an-arche (no-rule).

AN-ARCHE

Vatter provocatively asks "what if democracy were not, primarily, a form of rule or government, but a way of organizing living beings such that they can live under conditions of no-rule (*an-arche*)?"⁵² In this regard, *Living Law* is an important text. Specifically, chapter 4 on the mystical foundations of authority is pivotal. In my reading, this represents the culmination of Vatter's exploration of democracy and his engagement with the nexus between politics and religion. His conclusion is that democracy must be republican and anarchic.

In this section, I explore arche and an-arche. This includes building on Vatter's work, and anticipating anarchic possibilities. The etymology of the word *arche* is complex. The concept evokes the idea of a formative principle or gratuitous origin. For Arendt, in reflecting on what it means *to act*, "two Greek verbs *archein* ('to begin,' 'to lead, and finally 'to rule') and *prattein* ('to pass through,' 'to achieve,' 'to finish') correspond the two Latin verbs *agere* ('to set into motion,' 'to lead') and *gerere* (whose original meaning is 'to bear')."⁵³ So, *archein* is related to a group of words connoting action, where to act "in its most general sense, means to take an

⁴⁸ Vatter, respectively 40, 156, 64.

⁴⁹ Vatter, *Living Law*, ix.

⁵⁰ Vatter speaks of a "a civil religion of republican an-archy." Vatter, *Divine Democracy*, 256.

⁵¹ Vatter, 3.

⁵² Miguel Vatter, "Atheism, Postsecularism and the Legitimacy of Democracy," in *Political Theology Today: 100 Years after Carl Schmitt*, ed. Mitchell Dean, Lotte List, and Stefan Schwarzkopf (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), 88.

⁵³ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 189.

initiative, to begin, (as the Greek word *archein*, ‘to begin,’ ‘to lead,’ and eventually ‘to rule, indicates.’”⁵⁴

Nonetheless, the relationship between *arche* and *an-arche* is complicated. Gourgouris expands on these complexities asserting that “the word I am examining is *arche*, the political concept I really and substantially engage with and care about is *anarchy*, whose elemental significance, I argue, is actually inherent in the archaic conceptualization of *arche*.”⁵⁵ Vatter explores such complexities in a modern setting, using a range of sources like Buber, as well as Scholem’s “religious anarchism.”⁵⁶ In *Divine Democracy*, most of the references to the anarchic are general in nature. They illustrate politics in the real world. In *Living Law*, Vatter explores the dynamic *behind* this process.

It is important to say something further about the nature of the relationship between *arche* and *an-arche*. So, *arche* is about an origin. Ultimately, despite the best efforts of political leaders, the origin cannot be controlled. The beginning is not entirely stable. In other words, the origin is not the origin we expected. The inevitable fragmentation of the origin throws us back into the world. In this way, the tradition of Jewish political theology prepares the way for a republican civil (no-rule) religion. In a religious context, for example, the early church was anxious to justify its aporetic origin, that is, the human and divine are separate but one in Christ.⁵⁷ The Council of Nicaea then represents a substantial attempt to establish and defend this origin story for theological and political reasons (cf., Eusebius and Constantine).

Vatter pursues such implications in a chapter proposing “the hypothesis that the contemporary turn to ‘post-secularism’ can be understood as a response to Schmitt’s challenge by working out a political theology of democracy that is based on radical immanence and atheism.”⁵⁸ Radical immanence undermines the verticality of Western Christian theism. Subsequently, *an-arche* disarms the God of the strongman (and strongmen who behave like God). This God is emblematic of the *dispositif* of Western Christian theism.

In summary, “the origin is what commands and governs not only the birth, but also the growth, development, circulation, and transmission – in a word: the history – of that to which it has given origin.”⁵⁹ An origin story acts as a transcendent

⁵⁴ Arendt, 177.

⁵⁵ Stathis Gourgouris, “Arche” in *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon* no. 2 (2012): <http://www.politicalconcepts.org/arche-stathis-gourgouris/>.

⁵⁶ Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism: and other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 21.

⁵⁷ The inclusion of the infancy narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke indicate that this process of theological justification probably began as early as late first century.

⁵⁸ Vatter, “Atheism,” 76.

⁵⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *Creation and Anarchy: The Work of Art and the Religion of Capitalism*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2019), 52.

warrant, as “the past that *determines* the present is generally reduced, eventually, to a *divine* origin.”⁶⁰ Historically,

...the *archon* commands authority not only over the domain of rules that govern a society. He also embodies the point of departure of whatever trajectory such rules are to have in their implementation, whether they are to be enforced in principle or not, safeguarded for future generations (of rulers and ruled), or dismantled in favor of another course of rule, another beginning. Such is obviously the essence of the figure of the *patriarch*.⁶¹

In contrast, the anarchic life makes radical demands. It is no rule, no origin, no end, a life without why.⁶²

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I underline how the concept of theism is conducive to the production of hegemonic politics and practices. This is because theism, which is premised on separation, lends itself to the production of hierarchies. In contrast, I explore the concept of an-arche, initially through the work of Miguel Vatter. In summary, then, the main contributions of this essay concern tracing a trajectory in Vatter’s work, analysing the *dispositif* of Western Christian theism, interpreting the concept of theism, and exploring the concept of an-arche.

First, Miguel Vatter has made a significant contribution to political theology. Of course, I had to select and focus on certain features. In a future work, however, there would be value in returning to Vatter’s chapter on Habermas, for example, where Vatter outlines the anarchic importance of Habermas’s atheistic reading of Christianity. Nonetheless, this essay’s exploration of Vatter’s work contributes to our understanding of the politics-religion nexus. This is evident, for example, in this essay’s articulation the evolution of Vatter’s anarchic trajectory.

Second, I use the concept of the *dispositif* of Western Christian theism to problematise the political-religious nexus. Of course, there are many factors at play, but the focus is on theism as an integral and integrating part of the nexus. Specifically, Western Christian theism is a form of rationality, or suite of rationalities, that inscribe themselves in our practices and structures. Further, the concept of the *dispositif* used here stems predominantly from Foucault, but Agamben’s work on *oikonomia* is a logical complement, articulating the managerial, controlling, and separating dynamic of the nexus. In this context, I underline the role theism has, implicitly and explicitly, in legitimising/sanctifying the subject

⁶⁰ Kojève, *Authority*, 27.

⁶¹ Gourgouris, “Arche,” 1-2.

⁶² Schürmann, *Heidegger*, 293.

formation, status, and stratagems of prelates, princes, presidents, and prime ministers.

Third, this essay provides a fresh reading of Kojève. For a start, his work reinforces the suitability of the essay's concept of *separation*. Further, the essay's reading of Kojève is an invitation to think more broadly about the concepts of theism and atheism. For instance, while Kojève is in favour of the atheistic intuition, there is something an-archic about the way he sets up the debate, such that our preconceptions are undermined. In the spirit of Kojève's approach, I argue that, in the context of the *dispositif*, the concept of *theism* means more than religion, God, or church. Its locus is the politics-religion nexus. Certainly, the *dispositif* includes a desire for gods and god-like leaders.

Fourth, this essay explores the political problem of theism by examining the *dispositif* of Western Christian theism. In so doing, it outlines the potential role of *an-arche* in the subversion of the *dispositif*.

Lastly, Vatter's work provides a fresh perspective on the analysis of anarchy in its philosophical and political expressions. Specifically, Vatter is interested in discerning political theology without sovereignty. Moreover, he demonstrates its links to an-arche (no-rule). Vatter reminds us of the importance of understanding an-arche in a way that is philosophically, as well as politically, nuanced. In the long run, these perspectives cannot be separated. Fundamentally, the concept of *an-arche* questions the idea of divinely authorised and/or legitimising origins. As such, *an-arche* places *arche* in a new light. The *arche* as origin is not stable, but subject to anarchic disturbances. This is the anarchic order of things, which represents "the end of the modes of presencing in which one referent remains supreme,"⁶³ even if the referent is the God of Western Christian theism.

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⁶³ Schürmann, *Heidegger*, 302.

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