
CHAPTER 11

JUSTICE IN HISTORY

1. *Judaism and Christianity – The Abyss of History*

1.1 SITUATED KNOWLEDGE

I belong to the generation of Germans whose parents grew up under Hitler's regime, and one of my grandfathers and several uncles were soldiers in the *Wehrmacht*, Hitler's army. Born in 1962 and growing up in a small, mostly Catholic town in West Germany, I first heard and read about the *Judenvernichtung* (Shoah) at school. As most students did, I visited a concentration camp, in my case, Dachau, with my high school class when I was 16 years old. The sentence one reads at the entrance of the Dachau concentration camp made a profound impression on me: George Santayana's warning, "those who cannot *remember* the past are *condemned* to repeat it". The "Theology after Auschwitz" was a defining approach for me when I began to study Catholic theology and German literature, and when I was introduced to the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics at the Philosophical Seminar of the University of Tübingen, the concept and understanding of history intrigued me most. To take responsibility for the past in the present was unquestionable for many in my generation. Latin American liberation theology, Metz's and Moltmann's political theology and its critique of Western imperialism, the beginning establishment of feminist theology in Germany, and the engagement of Christians in the peace movement and anti-nuclear energy movement in the early 1980s were the context that drew me to theology. Though my own work in ethics later pulled me into a critical reflection of the new technologies in biomedicine, this chapter returns to the origins of my own work in theological ethics, reviewing it from today's perspective that has shifted considerably due to my present context and work in the USA.

One of the most important lessons I have learned over the last years is how troubling the intersection of racism and antisemitism (rooted in anti-Judaism *and* racism) is for a German emigrant to the USA. From my German perspective and as long as I can think, antisemitic racism was considered as "an evil of the past that must not be repeated", and my generation has tried hard to be sensitive to any sign of antisemitism in the German society. Still, it was a shocking experience for me in the early 1980s to go to a Jewish Culture Center in Germany and see the necessary security measures – the building was monitored by police – and everyone had to go through security checks before entering. The multiple other forms of racism in Germany's culture were long ignored and/or silenced in Germany; but even when they were mentioned, it was always against the shadow of the *Nazivergangenheit* (the Nazi past) and against the shadow of the Shoah, symbolized by the largest death camp, Auschwitz. From the American perspective, racism is conno-

tated differently: despite the trope of “colorblindness”, US culture decries the everyday experiences of African Americans, Native Americans, and all other minorities who are not considered the “real”, namely *white* Americans by the majority culture; the colorblind culture has therefore long been debunked theoretically by scholars who point to the structures of segregation, mass incarceration, and discrimination against black, brown, and non-Christian minorities especially.¹ It is against this background that I revisit the Christian narrative and its entanglement with Western political theory since early modernity. In this analysis, the concept and construction of history is central. In this chapter, I will begin with the modern philosophy of history since the 19th century, and in particular, with evolutionary theory and the assumption that human evolution culminates in the European race and Western civilization, both in Europe and in the USA. Some Jewish philosophers countered the underlying premises, which had shaped German idealism as much as Anglo-American liberalism, by turning to a philosophical concept of time and history through the trope of Messianism.

I will narrow my perspective to the most important philosophy of history aligned to the critical theory of the Frankfurt school, Walter Benjamin, and inquire how he responded to this discourse. For a critical political ethics, his approach is not an arbitrary lens. *First*, it entails an important reinterpretation of memory, i. e. as ethical or, more precisely, political-ethical remembrance that is as important today as it was at the time of Benjamin’s writings. *Second*, Benjamin’s concept sheds light on the reinterpretation of the Christian theology of history after the Shoah as apocalyptic rather than progressive that above all Johann Baptist Metz’s political theology signifies. *Third*, Benjamin’s concept of remembrance comes clearer in view when compared to the post-war development of continental philosophy, often seen through the lens of French philosophy rather than German philosophy. As is well known, Emmanuel Levinas’ work turns Heidegger’s ontological hermeneutics into an ethics of responsibility, to which I will turn in the next chapter. Taking up the challenge of responsibility for the past, I argue for a critical political ethics that strives to start from one’s *particular* historical experiences, and this leads us back into a hermeneutics that I have, with Boaventura de Sousa Santos, called diatopical.² It requires, among others, the theologian to attend to history from one’s own, situated experiences, and it is for this reason that I will turn to the context in which I grew up, and to the context of Christianity as my religious tradition.

1 Cf., for example, the recent work by Ta-Nehisi Coates that summarizes the sense of a black father in the contemporary US culture, T.-N. COATES, *Between the World and Me*, New York 2015.

2 B. DE SOUSA SANTOS, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide*, Boulder, CO 2014. Cf. also chapter 10 in this volume.

1.2 THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY INTERTWINED

The philosophy of history is deeply intertwined with the theology of history, and even though modern philosophy seems to break free from this tradition, its *tropes* often reflect their dependence on theology without necessarily embracing theology's particular claims. One theological trope that Christian theology has taught for centuries concerns sacrificial theology: through His *sacrifice*, this tradition holds, Christ the Messiah has *atoned* for the sins of the human (Adam), and through His resurrection, Christ has overcome death. The juxtaposition of Christian Messianism (Christ is the Messiah) and Jewish Messianism (the Messiah is yet to come), a particular eschatology – the “already” happened coming of the Messiah, and the “not yet” fulfilment of the Kingdom of God – has defined Christian theologies of history for centuries, but it also opened the questioning of God when human suffering is still ongoing, and salvation so evidently deferred. Human finitude and mortality, salvation, and redemption therefore became the object of multiple debates over the history of Christianity. Yet, atonement theology was never uncontested within Christian theology. One of the thorny questions, however, always concerned Christianity's relationship to Judaism, the anti-Judaism Christian theology entailed, and Christians' relation to Jews. In his historical study, Jeremy Worthen, for example, identifies three elements that have defined Christian anti-Judaism, linked to atonement:

1. “Jewish resistance to Christian claims implies the culpable failing of the Jewish people, individually and collectively, to be e. g. obedient to the manifest will of God, spiritual rather than carnal in their faith, or willing to heed reason and conscience;
2. The coming of Christ means that the calling of Abraham's biological children to be a distinct people, Israel in contrast to the nations, has come to an end, and with it any observance of the Torah given to Moses that contributes to the enduring distinction of Jews from Gentiles;
3. Judaism since the second Christian century has needed to be instructed by the Gentile Church as to what it means for Jews to be part of the faithful people of God, while the Church has nothing at all to learn from continuing Judaism.

The first thesis can be related to the scripture judgment of interpretive blindness, the second to the covenant judgment of displacement of Torah and the third to the people judgment of the division of history. Each thesis expresses a high degree of confidence in the Church's ability to interpret God's purposes in history generally, and specifically with regard to the Jewish people.”³

3 J. F. WORTHEN, *The Internal Foe. Judaism and Anti-Judaism in the Shaping of Christian Theology*, Newcastle 2009, 261.

The enlightenment paradigm of reason, however, created a new paradigm of science that in the 19th century merged evolutionary biology with the philosophy of history: modern empirical science, especially the biological science of “race” in the 18th and 19th century, legitimized the political-theological supremacy of European civilization and/or the white race. Among others, this “racial contract”, as Charles Mills has called the epistemology of modern thought,⁴ legitimized the image of the Jew (as well as the non-European “under-developed” races) as the ‘other’ of the European race, coinciding with the century-old anti-Judaist undercurrent of Christian theology of history. From the perspective of postwar 20th century, the Shoah is indeed the catastrophe (the literal meaning of the term Shoah). What renders the Shoah unique is not *only* its genocidal violence – after all, there had been other genocides before, and more were to follow after the Shoah, although none so excessive, bureaucratic, and systematic. It was also the collapse of the claim of highest rationality, morality, civilization, and political governance into the ‘scientific’ justification of murdering any individual who belonged to a particular collective, ‘the Jews’, in the name of humanity’s evolution. The extermination of ‘the Jews’ was regarded as a necessary *cleansing* of the human race that would benefit the further development of the human race writ large. Hitler’s race policy must therefore also be seen in connection with the biopolitics (Foucault), the euthanasia and negative eugenics via sterilization, and the positive eugenics, i. e. the attempt to enhance the German race, in view of the scientific studies of modern biology and genetics. The political dimension of the *Final Solution* can therefore not be separated from its scientific dimension, applied in the euthanasia and eradication of Jewish life and the lives of Jews in Europe, and the *Lebensborn* project that aimed to breed Aryan children.⁵

As empirical science dominated both biology and sociology since the 19th century, the humanities developed their own epistemology, centered on what was called the Human Sciences.⁶ At the beginning of the 20th century, German Protestant theology – the leading Christian theology – had fully embraced the new emphasis on historical studies that became a signature of theology and philosophy.

4 CH. W. MILLS, *The Racial Contract*, Ithaca, NY 1997.

5 Cf. for the euthanasia policies E. KLEE, “Euthanasie” im NS-Staat, Frankfurt a. M 1997. For the eugenics policies and context cf. P. WEINGART/J. KROLL/K. BAYERTZ (ed.), *Rasse, Blut und Gene. Geschichte der Eugenik und Rassenhygiene in Deutschland*, Frankfurt a. M. 1986. For the development of the “master race” in the so-called *Lebensborn* program cf. C. CLAY/M. LEAPMAN, *Master Race: The Lebensborn Experiment in Nazi Germany*, London 1995.

6 For an overview of the history in the 19th century, Gadamer’s study is valuable: H.-G. GADAMER, *Truth and Method*, London 1975. Similarly, in his recent study, Charles Taylor juxtaposes the two major epistemologies as Cartesian and hermeneutical. Cf. CH. TAYLOR, *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity*, Cambridge, MA 2016.

One effect, however, was that the method of historical criticism highlighted the problematic relationship between Judaism and Christianity.⁷ Historical exegesis contradicted the Christological reading of the Hebrew Bible in many ways, especially the “kerygmatic” reading that rendered the “Old” Testament anticipatory of the “New” Testament or even redundant.⁸ For the theologians who followed the (still wide-spread) supersessionist claim, i. e. that Christianity represents the New Covenant that “replaces” or “supersedes” God’s Covenant with Israel, there was no normative theological argument that Judaism was a “true” religion in present history – Adolf von Harnack’s work, for example, that was widely read and discussed, was seen by his critics as a renewal of Marcion’s claim to abandon the “Old Testament” from the Christian canon.

While science was engaged in proving the truth of race theory, anti-liberal nationalists emphasized the Christian heritage of Europe, often invoking antisemitism as part of this narrative. In Germany, the concept of the (ethnic) *Volks* became prominent, creating a connection between national and ethnic identity, which opened the door to the Nazi ideology of German supremacy. Werner Jeanrond explores the role of Protestant and Catholic theology in the Weimar Republic especially, asking why there was so little organized resistance against Hitler. His verdict that Christians had no constructive political theology is telling: Karl Barth’s theology removes theology (and faith) so far from political work that it is hard to see how dialectic theology could contribute to a political theology of resistance, notwithstanding Barth’s personal stance. Catholic theologians had no influential public voice and were censored by the antimodernist Church anyway. The Catholics’ power rested upon the ecclesial representation – and the Vatican nuncio Pacelli, who was the mastermind of the agreement of church-state relations in Germany, was more interested in this than in the rising antisemitism. In

7 Cf. For the 19th century theology cf. S. HESCHEL, *Abraham Geiger and the 19th Century Failure of Christian-Jewish Relations*, in: *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 16/1 (2003), 17–36. For a historical overview of the debates cf. J. F. WORTHEN, *The Internal Foe*. For a Jewish perspective, cf. the collection of essays on the relationship of Judaism and Christianity in: E. CARLEBACH/J. J. SCHACTER, *New Perspectives on Jewish-Christian Relations*, Leiden 2011.

8 Cf. the importance of Adolf von Harnack’s work and the rejection of the so-called Liberal Theology by Karl Barth: J. F. WORTHEN, *The Internal Foe*, chapter 4. Attention to German theology is warranted, because “Germany remained very much at the forefront of Western theological development for the time being” (Ibid. 166). Barth’s commitment to fight antisemitism does not prevent him from making highly problematic statements regarding the “Old Testament”: “A religio-historical understanding of the Old Testament in abstraction from the revelation of the risen Christ is simply an abandonment of the New Testament and the of sphere of the church in favour of that of the synagogue, and therefore in favour of an Old Testament [...] understood apart from its true object and content.” K. BARTH, *Dogmatics*, Vol 1:2, quoted in P. E. CAPETZ, *Friedrich Schleiermacher on the Old Testament*, in: *Harvard Theological Review* 102/3 (2009), 297–325, 298.

the 1930s, millions of Christians followed Hitler's National Socialist Party, and resistance was left to the few groups that spoke out publicly, such as the Confessional Church, and to individuals who resisted Hitler. The so-called Concordat that secured the Church's realm of power within civil society was signed by Hitler in 1933, and he used it to build up his international credibility. Jeanrond states:

Comparing Barth's and Rome's approach to the ideological conflict during the Weimar Republic, one recognizes in Barth a strong theological mistrust of human thinking that undermines all institutional realizations of faith in a political context; and, conversely, one finds in Rome a big trust in the institutional framework as legal guarantor of the possibility of a Christian faith within the limits of the church alone. Neither approach to the organization of Christian faith in Germany produced any form of coherent theology of resistance, and thus the activity of resisting the Nazi regime was left to a number of individuals.⁹

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, often seen as an exemplary figure of resistance, was indeed one of the individuals who actively worked for the British Military Intelligence since 1940. He was arrested in 1943 and hanged only a month before the end of the war, in April 1945. Bonhoeffer became well-known for his political theology of resistance only after his death, albeit then with great influence on the renewal of Protestant and Catholic theology in the 1960s, especially influential for the political theologies of Moltmann, Sölle, and Metz. His example does not, however, contradict the fact that institutionally, both the Catholic and the Protestant Church failed to stand up for their closest religious kin, the Jews, when it mattered most.¹⁰

1.3 A NEW PARADIGM FOR CHRISTIAN-JEWISH DIALOGUE

Despite the work that has been done over the last decades to reinitiate Christian-Jewish dialogue after the Shoah, and despite the efforts of Catholic Theology after the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church is still ambivalent about this relationship. It took the Catholic Church almost twenty years after the war to finally issue the Declaration *Nostra Aetate* at the Vatican II Council, ending the condemnation of 'the' Jews for the assumed killing of Jesus Christ. During his papacy, John Paul II repeatedly stressed the bond between the two religions as one of siblings and, rejecting any view that Judaism has been *replaced* (and superseded) by Christianity, affirmed Judaism's *ongoing* role in God's salvation history. Theol-

9 W. G. JEANROND, *From Resistance to Liberation Theology: German Theologians and the Non-Resistance to the National Socialist Regime*, in: *The Journal of Modern History* 64 (1992), 187–203, 191.

10 Cf. the analysis by S. Heschel about this transition in 20th century's Christian theology, S. HESCHEL, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany*, Princeton 2008. J. E. MC-NUTT, *A Very Damning Truth: Walter Grundmann, Adolf Schlatter, and Susannah Heschel's the Aryan Jesus*, in: *Harvard Theological Review* 105/03 (2012), 280–301.

ogy has begun to scrutinize the understanding of the separate religions connected by kinship, but overall, Christian theology has never centered its work around the Shoah. Furthermore, speaking to all lay Catholics, the Catechism of the Catholic Church from 1997 depicts Christianity's relation towards Judaism as one of generous acceptance, speaking more from a position of privilege than humility. In the underlying theology of history, Christianity is still depicted as the decisive event in history. In the section that has the headline *The glorious advent of Christ, the hope of Israel*, the Catechism evokes the anti-Judaist tropes that have defined Christianity over the centuries:

The glorious Messiah's coming is suspended at every moment of history until his recognition by "all Israel", for "a hardening has come upon part of Israel" in their "unbelief" toward Jesus [...] St. Peter says to the Jews of Jerusalem after Pentecost: "Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for establishing all that God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old." [...] St. Paul echoes him: "For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?" [...] The "full inclusion" of the Jews in the Messiah's salvation, in the wake of "the full number of the Gentiles", [...] will enable the People of God to achieve "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ", in which "God may be all in all". [...]¹¹

In 1998, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, close ally of John Paul II, reflected upon the interreligious dialogue in general, focusing on the question of truth. In his essay, he addressed the Christian-Jewish dialogue extensively. Ratzinger identifies two essential lines of faith in the Jewish religion that have not changed in Christianity:

The first is the Torah, commitment to God's will, and thus the establishment of his dominion, his kingdom, in this world. The second is the prospect of hope, the expectation of the Messiah – the expectation, indeed, the certainty, that God himself will enter into this history and create justice, which we can only approximate very imperfectly. The three dimensions of time are thus connected: obedience to God's will bears on an already spoken word that now exists in history and at each new moment has to be made present again in obedience. This obedience, which makes present a bit of God's justice in time, is oriented toward a future when God will gather up the fragments of time and usher them as a whole into his justice.¹²

Ratzinger adds that "the figure of Christ simultaneously unites and divides Israel and the Church: it is not in our power to overcome this division, but it keeps us together on the way to what is coming and for this reason must not become an enemy."¹³ Yet, Joseph Ratzinger's letter from the summer of 2018 has shown how

11 JOHN PAUL II, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1997, No 674 (references deleted).

12 CARDINAL JOSEPH RATZINGER, *Interreligious Dialogue and Jewish-Christian Relations*, in: *Communio* 25 (1998), 29–41, 36.

13 *Ibid.* 37.

difficult it is to spell out the “new theology” when one’s theology is so defined by a particular understanding of truth that is exclusively Christian, notwithstanding its special relationship to Judaism. In his essay, Ratzinger can be read to soften the language of the unrevoked covenant. For example, he alludes to breaches of the Covenant within the biblical history of Israel, but he only speaks of Israel’s breach, never considering that the same could also hold true to Christians:

[...] the covenant history between God and man also includes human failure, the breaking of the covenant and its internal consequences: the destruction of temple, the scattering of Israel, and the call to repentance, which restores man’s capacity for the covenant.¹⁴

Up to today, the debate on faith and reason, and faith and truth, suffers from a hermeneutics that far too easily brushes over historical experiences and, more particularly, over injustices of the past; ultimately, it is more influenced by Gadamer’s ontological hermeneutics that argues for truth that is actualized in history than by a critical hermeneutics that eschews any attempt to interpret historical events as the realization of or participating in truth. Furthermore, instead of dismissing any form of a diatopical or contextual hermeneutics as relativist, as Ratzinger does, Christian theology must account for any concept that brushes over the catastrophes of the past and present in the name of the future.

Regarding this thorny relationship of Christianity and Judaism, the question for the further development of a critical political ethics is whether we have an alternative concept that can guide the memory of the past. During the first few decades of the 20th century, Jewish philosophers and theologians contributed broadly to the ongoing debate on the concept of history, centered on salvation, redemption, Messianism, and the relationship of doctrine and ethics. Leo Baeck, Hermann Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig, and Martin Buber explicitly reflected on the Jewish-Christian relationship, while authors such as Ernst Bloch, Theodor Adorno, and Walter Benjamin, along with many other Jewish scholars or writers, began their careers without much concern for their Jewish identities. If the experienced history matters at all for the conceptualization of history, however, it is important to note that in contrast to their Christian colleagues, most of these Jewish scholars struggled for their basic political rights, if not for the right to their mere academic, political, and personal existence. Many of them emigrated after 1933, others were killed or, like Walter Benjamin, committed suicide, while Hitler’s war destroyed Europe and killed more than six million Jews. With this ca-

14 J. RATZINGER, *Grace and Vocation without Remorse. Commentary on the Treatise “De Iudaeis”*, in: *ibid.* 4 (2018), 387–406, 183. Cf. also J. F. WORTHEN, *The Internal Foe*. Though interreligious dialogue is not my topic here, the underlying hermeneutics must be reflected in any interreligious dialogue. Cf. D. TRACY, *Western Hermeneutics and Interreligious Dialogue*, in: *Interreligious Hermeneutics* (2010), 1–43.

tastrophe, one may assume, the self-confident, triumphant Christian *theology* of history should have come to an end, just as the Eurocentric progressivism should have ended in Auschwitz: as Hans Jonas argued, after Auschwitz, theodicy has become impossible. Likewise, for Adorno and the Frankfurt School of his generation, the notion of progress in history, described among others by Hegel in his *Phenomenology of the Spirit* and his *Philosophy of History*, must be reversed into a *negative* dialectic. The question today is whether their critique is taken seriously or not.

The concept of history is crucial for the relationship between Jewish and Christian theology – but *whether*, and if so, *how* especially a Christological theology can even be conceived after the Shoah is far from clear. My modest claim in this chapter is that it must entail an ethics of remembrance that translates into an ethics of responsibility for the past. However it will play out, it must be treated as a task that questions Christianity's own anti-Judaism *together* with its triumphalist theological hermeneutics. I agree with Damon Berry that this is especially important in regards to American culture that blends the theological trope of the “new chosen people” with its national identity.¹⁵

2. Walter Benjamin: Justice, Forgiveness, and Forgetting

The question of restorative justice has occupied theology and philosophy over the last decades, especially in the wake of the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* of South Africa, the genocide in Rwanda, and the Yugoslavian war in the 1990s. The question of reconciliation is at the heart of any philosophy of history, and it will therefore be the starting point of my analysis of Walter Benjamin's reflections.

In an early text, *The Meaning of Time in the Universe*, Benjamin asks whether there is a way to conceive of time as the reconciliation with the injustices of the past, or whether the forgetfulness of any evil is in fact the driving force in the “economy of the moral universe”:

In order to struggle against retribution, forgiveness finds its powerful ally in time. For time, in which Ate pursues the evildoer, is not the lonely calm of fear but the tempestuous storm of forgiveness which precedes the onrush of the Last Judgment and against which she cannot advance. This storm is not only the voice in which the evildoer's cry of terror is drowned; it is also the hand that obliterates the traces of his misdeeds, even if it must lay waste to the world in the process. As the purifying hurricane speeds ahead of the thunder and lightning, God's fury roars through history in the storm of forgiveness, in order to sweep away everything that would be consumed forever in the lightning bolts of divine wrath.

What we have expressed here metaphorically must be capable of being formulated clearly and distinctly in conceptual form: the meaning of time in the economy of the moral uni-

15 Cf. D. T. BERRY, *Blood and Faith: Christianity in American White Nationalism*, Syracuse/New York 2017.

verse. In this, time not only extinguishes the traces of all misdeeds but also – by virtue of its duration, beyond all remembering or forgetting – helps, in ways that are wholly mysterious, to complete the process of forgiveness, though never of reconciliation.¹⁶

The connection that Benjamin makes here between the ‘alliance’ of forgetting, forgiveness, and time will become a crucial point in his later writings. We see already a particular writing style, which connects fragmentary stories and metaphors with a conceptual-philosophical question. In the *Critique of Violence*, Benjamin juxtaposes the arbitrary power and violence of the Greek Goddess Lethe with the Jewish divine judgment against the Korah group in the Book of Numbers, arguing that the Jewish’s God’s judgment is driven by justice and not by mere power.¹⁷ In the text quoted above, he juxtaposes Ate, the Greek Goddess of folly and rash who tempts humans to misdeeds, with the “tempestuous storm of forgiveness” that “precedes the Last Judgment.” Benjamin, however, cannot embrace forgiveness as the forgetting over time, symbolized in the “storm” in which the “evildoer’s cry of terror” drowns and “the traces of his misdeeds” are obliterated. Like Ate, the Jewish God he alludes to is a God of fury – but in contrast to the Greek Goddess who evokes fear of retribution, the Jewish God sweeps away what would otherwise be forgotten. However, what would the concept of “the meaning of time in the economy of the moral universe” look like? If remembrance of “everything” is the condition for *reconciliation*, must the “economy of the moral universe” be transcended yet again, towards a different meaning of time, now informed by an alternative reading of theology? As we will see, this question will accompany Benjamin throughout his life.

2.1 MESSIANIC HISTORY?

Two texts point especially to Benjamin’s ongoing interest in how, for the sake of justice, the past can be retrieved or saved from the passing of time, which is a condition for reconciliation. The *Theological-Political Fragment* is a key text at least for one important strain of thought in Benjamin’s work, namely the difference and interrelation of the order of the profane (political, legal) and the Messianic.¹⁸ Read

16 W. BENJAMIN, *The Meaning of Time in the Universe*, in: M. BULLOCK/M. W. JENNINGS (ed.), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol. I, 1913–1926, Cambridge, MA 2002, 286–287.

17 This and the next chapter draws on my essay on Walter Benjamin’s theology: H. HAKER, *Walter Benjamin and Christian Critical Ethics – A Comment*, in: C. DICKINSON/S. SYMONS (ed.), *Walter Benjamin and Theology*, New York 2016, 286–316. There, I interpreted the essay “On the Critique of Violence”, which I will not do here.

18 W. BENJAMIN, *Theological-Political Fragment*, in: H. EILAND/M. W. JENNINGS (ed.), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol. III, 1935–1938, Cambridge, MA 2002, 305–306. What makes this text difficult to read is the decontextualization of the conversation it engages with – apart from Bloch, no other author is mentioned. Yet, they can be brought to the table: Cohen, Rosenzweig,

from a (Jewish-Christian) theological perspective, the question Benjamin raises is all-too familiar: Can the kingdom of God be established by human acts or a political order? Or is the time of history so distinct from the Messianic kingdom (or the Kingdom of God) that we can only hope for God's grace? In contrast to the Greek, especially the Heraclitan philosophy of history that refers to the flux of time, the Messianic Jewish (and Christian) tradition defines time as the ever-possible 'coming' or expectation of the Messiah. Over against the teleological-progressive concept invoked in the modern tradition, the apocalyptic tradition sees historical events both as revelation (*apocalypse* in Greek) and as the moment of decision (*Kairos*). This construction (expectation, revelation, and decision) creates an urgency of action, which it would not have were it completely disconnected from the expectation of the Messiah.

Benjamin's fragment is not dated – it was either written in 1920/21 or, taking up some of the early thoughts, in 1937–38. Thematically, it belongs to the earlier writings in which Benjamin reflected upon the concepts of time and history. It is based on several juxtapositions, which inter-relate 'dialectically' – although the hyphen in the title of the "theological-political" fragment was given to it by Adorno. On the surface, it merely alludes to the relation between the political and the theological realm, avoiding merging them into one sphere – the mistakes of state-driven political theologies. In contrast, the "world to come" remains transcendent to the political world. The divine manifests itself only in the "revolutionary force" and in communities – "nowhere in 'social organizations'".¹⁹ In other texts from the early period, most famously in the *Critique of Violence*, but also in Benjamin's habilitation on the German *Mourning Plays of the 17th Century*, a specific philosophy of history emerges that replaces the Hegelian dialectic, but also departs from the Marxian understanding of communism as the telos of history.²⁰ Benjamin's point is that there are always traces of the future in the past – as well as traces of the past in the present – so that modernity cannot claim to have left be-

and of course Scholem all offer important insight to the background, and these contexts are further illuminated by recent scholarship. Cf. C. DICKINSON/S. SYMONS (ed.), *Walter Benjamin and Theology*.

19 W. BENJAMIN, *World and Time*, in: M. BULLOCK/M. W. JENNINGS (ed.), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol. I, 1913–1926, 226–227.

20 From a Christian ethical perspective, it would be interesting to interpret Benjamin's essay on the *Mourning Play*, because the plays are tightly connected to the (Protestant) Christian theology of the 17th century and the ongoing wrestling with the Reformation theologies in Europe. To my knowledge, so far this essay has not raised much interest in theological scholarship. Cf. for an excellent analysis of the political theologies of the time and the contribution of Andreas Gryphius, O. BACH, *Zwischen Heilsgeschichte und säkularer Jurisprudenz: politische Theologie in den Trauerspielen des Andreas Gryphius*, Berlin 2014.

hind, for example, the *state of nature*. Neither is mythical violence, as depicted in Greek mythology, overcome in the modern state. The realm of history is the sphere of human striving for happiness. Importantly, Benjamin repudiates, however, the teleological view of history as such, claiming that the Messianic Kingdom cannot be realized *in history* – it is not the *goal* but the *end* (i. e. the termination) of historical time.²¹ Still paradoxically, by striving towards its own goal, happiness, profane history may indirectly “promote”, as the text says, the coming of the Kingdom. Actions, this means, are indeed structured by a *telos*, the goal that an agent strives for; the same, however, does not hold true for history.²²

A teleological, progressive concept of history that is aligned with forgiveness of misdeeds or injustices over time, Benjamin will claim for the rest of his life, erases the tragedies that history produces and thereby betrays the hopes of past generations. After all, how else than through forgetting can humans live with tragedy, guilt, and suffering? Again, Benjamin retreats to the symbolic language of theology: the Messiah, he recalls, “redeems, completes, and creates” the relation of historical events (*historisches Geschehen*) with the Messianic.²³ As completion and redemption, the kingdom of God is the end of the historical *dynamis*, the striving for happiness as well as the reality of unhappiness or, in other words, suffering. Yet, the Messianic is not tied to either a flawed human nature or sin that requires “atonement” or “justification”, but to the tragedy (*Unglück*) of human suffering. The Messiah is an allegory of hope that in the “world to come”, suffering will end altogether: not only putting an end to suffering in the present or future, but also in the past. The Messianic is a counter-concept to the teleological concept of history. The Messianic, Benjamin says, is a force of *immediate* intensity of the *heart*. He emphasizes this rhetorically: the “heart” means the “inner, individu-

21 Benjamin here argues against the developmental model of history that underlies, at the same time, also the Christian concept of supersessionism. Benjamin studied Protestant theology, especially the theology of von Harnack, in the context of his work on the *German Mourning Plays*. For a renewed discussion of the relationship of progress history, colonialism, and critical theory – albeit without an analysis of Benjamin – cf. A. ALLEN, *The End of Progress*, New York 2016.

22 Cf. for the difficult relationship of history and narrative in P. RICŒUR, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 1-3, Chicago 1988. Ricœur has returned to this topic in P. RICŒUR, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Chicago 2006.

23 W. BENJAMIN, *Theological-Political Fragment*, 305. The idea of the Messiah is in fact, in most traditional lines of this idea, a human figure, and it is found in several religions (besides Judaism and Christianity, it is found in Islam, but also, beyond the monotheistic religions, in Hinduism) – sometimes connected to the idea of kingdom, sometimes to the prophets, or to the priests. An alternative term for the Messiah is ‘son of human’. In contrast to the figure, however, the Jewish/Christian idea of the ‘Messianic’ (justice, redemption, salvation) is in fact connected to the divine, insofar as it is God who ‘anoints’ the Messiah (Hebrew for ‘Anointed’, as ‘Christos’ is the Greek term for it) who will bring justice to the world.

al” human being that is touched in the suffering of tragedy – as hope. Contrasting the theological metaphor of God’s “imprint” in the human heart that is often used to describe an inner voice of conscience, Benjamin’s Messianic force is “going through” the individual’s suffering. This difference of tying the Messianic to the suffering of the individual person as counter-concept to the “forgetting and forgiving”, or passing of time, is far from trivial. For as we know from the phenomenology of suffering, bodily pain, torture, and affliction isolate suffering people; the world withdraws from them, and they themselves may withdraw from the world and fall silent. Suffering produces hopelessness:²⁴ “The more I merge with my body as a sufferer, the more I slide away from other people and all their projects that *transcend* the body and pain out there in the great big world.”²⁵ Hence, if the “immediate”, “intense” force that “goes through the heart” of the *suffering* person is identified with the Messianic, it may well be that the sensual, affective counter-experience in the traumatic standstill of time that is suffering is the experiential dimension of the possibility of hope. Furthermore, the trope of the Messianic points to a moral summons that Benjamin will develop only later, namely that suffering must be acknowledged, that misdeeds and atrocities must *not* be forgotten and forgiven over time but remembered. Only when the principle of the “worldly” time, i. e. the forgetting of injustices over time, and the principle of action, i. e. the striving for happiness that nevertheless results in tragedy and suffering, is overcome, *reconciliation* is possible. In fact, reconciliation is redemption, the Messianic “*restitutio in integrum*”.²⁶

2.2 BENJAMIN’S THESES “ON THE CONCEPT OF HISTORY”

The shift from regarding the coming of the Messiah as atonement for sins to the Messianic hope in the experience of tragedy determines what Benjamin will develop in one of the last texts he wrote before his death in 1940. In *On the Concept of History*, Benjamin returns to the topic of happiness, now however from the perspective of a critical theorist who is engaged with the concept of history from a particular perspective: in his words, the perspective of the historical materialist. Having left the religious discourse behind, replacing it with the Marxian question of suffering as oppression, Benjamin goes against Marx who claimed that the “dead will bury the dead.”

24 Cf. J. AMERY, *At the Mind’s Limit. Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities*, Bloomington, IN 1980; S. WEIL, *The Love of God and Affliction*, in: G. A. PANICHAS (ed.), *The Simone Weil Reader*, New York 1977, 439–468; J. STAUFFER, *Ethical Loneliness: The Injustice of Not Being Heard*, New York, NY 2015.

25 A. J. VETLESEN, *A Philosophy of Pain*, London 2004, 29 f.

26 W. BENJAMIN, *Theological-Political Fragment*, 306.

The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot take its poetry from the past but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped away all superstition about the past. The former revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to smother their own content. *The revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead in order to arrive at its own content.* There the phrase went beyond the content – here the content goes beyond the phrase.²⁷

In contrast, Benjamin insists again that the concept of history must entail the possibility of reconciliation with the past, captured in the theological term of redemption. In this late text that echoes the earlier ones throughout its modifications, the argumentation is the following: while human agents strive for happiness, the historian deciphers the traces of happiness (and tragedy) in retrospect. Similar to Ernst Bloch's understanding, Benjamin envisions the historical materialist to discern the visions, expectations, the dreams, and the hopes that were present or virulent in the past – an endeavor he engaged in for more than ten years in his *Arcades Project*.²⁸ However, the historical materialist, unlike his counterpart, the Hegelian idealist or the Marxian materialist, cannot simply turn to the future. For him, the only future that is attainable is the future of the past. Happiness “is only in the air we have breathed, among people we could have talked to, women who could have given themselves to us.”²⁹ Happiness is the promise of the profane realm of personal and political action, the possibility and potential that was *expected* in the past, awaiting to be fulfilled, to be actualized – in other words, the happiness that could have been, but all too often ended up as a missed opportunity. For the historical materialist, this insight does not result in melancholic contemplation (though melancholia is never far in Benjamin's writings); rather, the discernment of “the weak messianic power” is part of the potential to “awake” from the dreams of the past and present, namely that progress is inevitable. In fact, critique is the form awakening takes, aimed at motivating agents to act against the forces that hold people in their grip.

We seek a teleological moment in the context of dreams. Which is the moment of waiting. The dreams wait secretly for the awakening; the sleeper surrenders himself to death only provisionally, waits for the second when he will cunningly wrest himself from its clutches. So, too, the dreaming collective, whose children provide the happy occasion for its own awakening.³⁰

27 K. MARX, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, New York, NY 2008.

28 W. BENJAMIN, *The Arcades Project*, Cambridge, MA 2002.

29 W. BENJAMIN, *On the Concept of History*, in: H. EILAND/M. W. JENNINGS, (ed.), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol. IV, 1938-1940, Cambridge, MA 2003, 389–400, 389, Thesis II.

30 W. BENJAMIN, *The Arcades Project*, 388.

As is well known, the naïve dreams of happiness that had motivated the Russian Revolution ended in Stalin's Great Purge in Russia, in 1936-1937; likewise, the dreams that motivated the November Revolution of 1918 ended with the rise of Hitler to power, and with the Hitler-Stalin pact that both dictators had just signed when Benjamin wrote his *Theses*. Benjamin knew what he was writing about: he had visited Moscow in 1926/27, and since 1933, he had been subjected to the Nazi persecutions, stripped of all of his political rights, barely surviving in exile. Against this backdrop, the belief in critique as awakening is itself all but melancholic. Rather, it is a statement of resistance and courage in the midst of tragedy.

While in the *Theological-Political Fragment*, the messianic was the intensity that "passes through" the suffering of tragedy, for the historian, the dreams of the past must be discerned as those moments in which the "coming of the Messiah" could have been "promoted," as the *Fragment* had stated:

But just as a force, by virtue of the path it is moving along, can augment another force on the opposite path, so the secular order – because of its nature as secular – promotes the coming of the Messianic Kingdom.³¹

The task of the historian is therefore to closely attend to, i. e. to *remember* the dreams that are otherwise "forgotten" over the course of time – not in a contemplative fashion of understanding the past but as an action-oriented, ethical remembrance that is, at the same time, a responsibility for the past:

The past carries a secret index with it by which it is referred to redemption. Doesn't a breath of the air that pervaded earlier days caress us as well? In the voices we hear, isn't there an echo of now silent ones? Don't the women we court have sisters they no longer recognize? If so, then there is a secret appointment between past generations and the present one. Then our coming was expected on earth. Then, like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim. Such a claim cannot be settled cheaply. The historical materialist is aware of this.³²

Without the theological trope, namely the expectation of the Messianic time that redeems the past as well as the present, Benjamin could not make the next move in his argument – but it remains a trope, not a turn to theology.³³ Against the evolutionary thinking of Marxist theory, Benjamin is convinced that Messianism provides an alternative concept of history and time that historical materialism ought to take up as its guiding metaphor for a philosophy of history. Only when the past has a different relation to the present than merely being 'pre-history' or a

31 W. BENJAMIN, *Theological-Political Fragment*, 305.

32 W. BENJAMIN, *On the Concept of History*, 390, Thesis II (translation modified).

33 Cf. R. WOLIN, *From Messianism to Materialism: The Later Aesthetics of Walter Benjamin*, in: *New German Critique* 22/22 (1981), 81–108; S. WEIGEL, *Walter Benjamin: Die Kreatur, das Heilige, die Bilder*, Frankfurt a. M. 2008.

previous stage of history, it can unfold a utopian-ethical energy for the present. Yet, remaining a materialist, Benjamin insists in Marxian vein that class struggle is the struggle for the material goods without which no happiness, the direction of human striving, can come to pass. He even cites Hegel affirmingly, elevating the quote as motto for Thesis IV: “Seek for food and clothing first; then shall the Kingdom of God be granted to you.”³⁴ The oppressed classes certainly struggle for material goods – and Benjamin, living not only the life of the impoverished intellectual but as the Jewish *outcast* of society, obviously knew of what he was speaking. However, the struggle does not *only* aim at material goods: it also aims at justice for the past. The past is not primarily accessible in the traditional historical form of conscious memory; the dream images that collapse time similar to a *déjà vu*, are more like involuntary flashes of memories.³⁵

The uncontrollable dimension of memory fascinated Benjamin, famously described in Proust’s novel *A la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*), which Benjamin translated in Paris. Furthermore, the relation of the dream-images and the awakening are “dialectic images”; the present does not attend to them in contemplation but with an *ethical* attitude: the present has a “a *weak* messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim”. The present cannot “complete” or redeem the past – this is not within the power of any present generation; but the present has an appointment (*Verabredung*) with the past, as Benjamin says – it is summoned to *remember* the wishes as the future of the past and to discern the dream images and missed opportunities. Since time and the evolutionary model of history tend to lure agents into the attitude of forgetting, remembrance is, first and foremost, the resistance against this force. Remembrance is not *pedagogical*, aimed to better understanding one’s present in view of the past; quite to the contrary, it is an *ethical* memory that discloses, at a moment of danger, the threat of “conformism”: to become complacent and surrender to the “ruling class”. “Redemption depends on the tiny fissure in the continuous catastrophe.”³⁶ The function of this ethical memory is to pick up the shattered dreams like a baton, pointing at the dreams of the past in order to take responsibility in the present political struggle for happiness and justice. The historical materialist, this means, does not just create an archive of the history of the oppressed. Rather, “to brush history against

34 W. BENJAMIN, *On the Concept of History*, 390, Thesis IV. In an often cited variant, Bert Brecht paraphrased it in this way in the *Threepenny Opera*: “Erst kommt das Fressen, dann die Moral”, “First comes a full stomach, then comes ethics”. It is a ‘materialist’ reading of human flourishing, just like the term happiness is juxtaposed to the fulfilment (eudaimonia) that Aristotle identifies as the theoretical life.

35 Cf. W. BENJAMIN, *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*.

36 W. BENJAMIN, *Central Park*, 185.

the grain”³⁷ provides the *motivational sources* for the current struggle, because in the past, the historical materialist will find virtues desperately needed in any political struggle: “confidence, courage, humor, cunning, and fortitude” (390). If remembered and activated in the present, these virtues do not only connect the present actors with the past ones in their struggles to overcome complacency and indifference – remembrance may *also* inform and educate agents about how others have exercised these virtues of resistance concretely.³⁸

Historical materialism is critical because it resembles the awakening from dreams, ignorant about the future of the present time, which remains open and unknown, strived for in and through one’s actions. Benjamin’s stance towards history contrasts starkly with the proverbial confidence that assures the victims of history that overall, the arc of the moral universe is long but history bends towards justice. Although *intended* as encouragement not to give up at times of despair, Benjamin would have been critical of such an assurance about history:

Just as a physicist determines the presence of ultraviolet light in the solar spectrum, so *the historical materialist determines the presence of a messianic force in history*. Whoever wishes to know what the situation of a ‘redeemed humanity’ might actually be, what conditions are required for the development of such a situation, and when this development can be expected to occur, poses questions to which there are no answers. He might just as well seek to know the color of ultraviolet rays.³⁹

In his early writings, Benjamin thought of the Day of Judgment more in correlation with the state of guilt, juxtaposing Greek mythology with the Jewish tradition. In the above-quoted *The Meaning of Time in the Moral Universe*, the forgetting over time concerned the suffering as well as the misdeeds of the past; time completes the process of forgetting as forgiveness. However, as we have seen, Benja-

37 W. BENJAMIN, *On the Concept of History*, 392, Thesis VII.

38 In chapter 1 of this volume, I address the question of political transformations or revolution in Hannah Arendt’s and Paul Ricœur’s writing. Ricœur had claimed that as much as the question of power and violence accompanies the struggles for justice, so does the question of authority and tradition. Both authors claim that present generations refer to past generations and foundational narratives. For Hannah Arendt, the American *Declaration of Independence* served as a foundational narrative that aspires to guarantee every individual the right to have rights. In a similar vein, I asked whether after World War II, the *Human Rights Declaration* may not serve as a foundational narrative for the struggle for human rights and dignity. Ricœur’s answer, however, differed from this line of thinking, and I believe he rightly points to the “capable human” as the authority that ought to suffice as motivation for moral agency. Yet, it is also captured in a tradition, as personal, social, and political responsibility. Ricœur gives one example for this that is especially striking in its power: instead of pointing to political leaders or revolutionary movements, he points to the individual human being, symbolized, among so many others, in the refugee Aeneas who in his flight carries his father on his back.

39 W. BENJAMIN, *On the Concept of History*, 402, Thesis XVIIa (Paralipomena). (My emphasis).

min holds that this runs counter to the eschatological reading of history in Judaism, because “time not only extinguishes the traces of all misdeeds but also – by virtue of its duration, beyond all remembering or forgetting – helps, in ways that are wholly mysterious, to complete the process of forgiveness, though never of reconciliation”.⁴⁰ Now, in the materialist concept of history, the eschatological metaphor of “the world to come” points to history’s own completion as the double negation, the destruction of the destructive process of the (mere) passing of time. Redemption now stands for the state in which time collapses as duration or *chronos*, and the Judgment Day is connected to the full memory of the past:

Of course only a redeemed mankind is granted the fullness of its past – which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments. Each moment it has lived becomes a *citation à l'ordre du jour*. And that day is Judgment Day.⁴¹

In quoting the theological concept of *apokatastasis*, the traditional understanding of redemption on the Last Day, in which all moments of time are gathered, Benjamin “gathers” the past theological tradition – in the Greek language – transforming it into his understanding of the “weak messianic power”, namely to cite the trope of eschatological hope. This method connects the work of the historical materialist with the earlier reflection on the participation of humans in the coming of the Messiah:

We know that the Jews were prohibited from inquiring into the future: the Torah and the prayers instructed them in remembrance. This disenchanting the future, which holds sway over all those who turn to soothsayers for enlightenment. This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future became homogeneous, empty time. For every second was the small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter.⁴²

The fullness of time is important because, by contrast, it defines the deciphering work of the historian as a fragmentary and momentous, yet anticipatory, endeavor, promoting the coming of the Messianic time, the end of history. The retrieval

40 W. BENJAMIN, *The Meaning of Time in the Universe*. A very deep and difficult debate on forgiveness after the Holocaust centers on exactly this relation of justice and forgiveness – especially among some Jewish thinkers such as Vladimir Jankelevitch, Jacques Derrida, or Emmanuel Levinas. As their conversation partner stemming from the Christian tradition, Paul Ricœur took up this debate explicitly only late in his life, in his important book P. RICŒUR, *Memory, History, Forgetting*. All these authors discuss the question of justice and forgiveness in the aftermath of the Shoah, and if for no other reason, they are important conversation partners for Christian theology.

41 W. BENJAMIN, *On the Concept of History*, 390, Thesis III. Benjamin evokes Messianism as dialectic of the theological and the political, and both elements define the concept of history. Cf. W. GOLDSTEIN, *Messianism and Marxism: Walter Benjamin and Ernst Bloch's Dialectical Theories of Secularization*, in: *Critical Sociology* 27/2 (2001), 246–281.

42 Cf. W. BENJAMIN, *On the Concept of History*, 397, Thesis XVIII B.

of the past as the citability, i. e. the remembrance “in all its moments”, is indeed the end of history, the reconciliation as redemption of the past that Benjamin had juxtaposed with the “forgetting and forgiving” over time. The present entails a “weak messianic power” that seems to be directed as much to the past as to the present: “The Now of recognizability [Das Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit] is the moment of awakening.”⁴³ Remembrance turns into the *Kairos*, i. e. the moment that requires action.

Perhaps because Benjamin in the *Theses* is mostly interested in pointing out the ramifications for the concept of history, he emphasizes the task of the historical materialist but not the form political action may take. In any case, what we can see is that Benjamin’s historical materialist does not look at history as the observer but as a *responder*. Connecting remembrance to agency, the historical materialist strives to motivate the present generation to show the same virtues of resistance, “courage, humor, cunning, and fortitude”⁴⁴ that past generations showed in their struggle for a better life.

There are two important consequences we can draw from Benjamin’s concept of history for the further development of a critical political ethics: *first*, a philosophy of history that follows the developmental model of progress in history puts the past to rest and forgets atrocities over time, rendering its remembrance irrelevant in light of the achievements of the present and the prospects of the future. The suffering and the tragedies of the past will be, over time, “forgotten and forgiven”, and likewise, the dreams of the past will be buried in history, because the present will be engaged in its own dreams of the future. Over against Kafka’s verdict: “there is hope. But not for us”, Benjamin holds: “Only for the sake of the hopeless ones have we been given hope.”⁴⁵ Some may want to read Benjamin’s Messianism as a “transcendental messianism”, as Michael Mack has done, referring to Kant’s influence on Benjamin’s thinking. But Kant had insisted that human beings and history need what he calls the postulate of God; it cannot be proven but is still necessary to be motivated to moral action. But this concept of religion – otherwise constrained by reason and morality – is juxtaposed to what Benjamin has in mind. At best, the *Thesis* could be read as a postulate of hope that is rooted in the negation of negation, the hope that suffering can indeed be transformed into justice.

Maybe the fascination of Benjamin’s text stems from the fact that his call to remember is read in light of his own suffering of tragedy. If the concept of history

43 W. BENJAMIN, *The Arcades Project*, No 18, 4.

44 W. BENJAMIN, *On the Concept of History*, 390, Thesis IV.

45 W. BENJAMIN, *Goethe’s Elective Affinities*, in: M. BULLOCK/M. W. JENNINGS (ed.), *Walter Benjamin. Selective Writings*, Vol. I, 1913-1926. Cambridge MA 1996, 297–360, 356.

that Benjamin envisions requires of the present generation to remember the past, Benjamin's life itself becomes a symbol of this responsibility. Benjamin's work, however, has sometimes been reduced to the mere citation of some lines. It is therefore necessary to embrace the context in which the insistence on hope becomes so urgent:

The only historian capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past is the one who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious.⁴⁶

Second, Benjamin's materialist interpretation of the traditionally theological concepts of hope, remembrance, reconciliation, and redemption has ramifications for theology's own understanding and response to the theology of history. Critical political ethics can take up the image of the constellation of the past and present, which Benjamin interprets ethically as a summons of the past, for the analysis of the violence in the acts, structures, and history of political history as well as in Church history. Complacency, rather than resistance, describes the attitude of most Catholics (and theologians) in view of the destructive powers in both realms. Conformism is a threat within academic theology, too. The suppression of the histories and theologies of those who were (and are) regarded as dissenting from the proclaimed doctrine of faith demonstrate that even the freedom to reason (i. e. theo-logy) is curtailed by the Church that claims its natural law theology is in line with the human rights framework. In many respects, however, it is neither in line with the human rights nor with the scholastic natural law theory, rather reiterating the neoscholastic interpretation of the 19th century.⁴⁷

Ethical remembrance, understood alongside the lines of Benjamin's concept of history, insists on the necessity to reinterpret Messianic theology as an alternative to the progressivist philosophy of history. Yet, in the future, Christian theology could *also* – if not even more appropriately – draw on the figure of the paraclete: this figuration of remembrance and advocacy is the theological metaphor for faith in history. Like Messianic theology, Paracletic theology provides an alter-

46 W. BENJAMIN, *On the Concept of History*, 391, Thesis VI. Emphasis in the text.

47 For a strong critique of this tradition and a defence of the scholastic natural law tradition cf. C. L. H. TRAINA, *Feminist Ethics and Natural Law: The End of the Anathemas*, Washington, D.C. 1999. An argument for a positive reception of natural law in black theology cf. V. W. LLOYD, *Black Natural Law*, New York, NY 2016. In contrast to these and other efforts to rescue natural law theory from the authoritative and anti-history interpretation, I am convinced that any reference to 'human nature' runs the risk of 'naturalizing' historical experiences. For a discussion of this problem cf. J. HABERMAS, *The Future of Human Nature*, Cambridge, UK 2003; J. HABERMAS, *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays*, Cambridge, UK/Malden, MA 2008. Cf. my discussion in: H. HAKER, *Habermas and the Question of Bioethics*, in: *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 11/4 (2019), 61–86 (guest-edited by Klaus Viertbauer and Maureen Junker-Kenny).

native to the (progressivist) dialectic of history. The paraclete that is mentioned in the Gospel of John echoes God's force or energy, the (feminine) *ruach* in the Book of Genesis, accompanying the history of the people of Israel; it is a reminder of God's promise to be present in history. The paraclete, Jesus comforts his disciples before his death, will be present as the *advocate* who accompanies the witnesses of faith, *reminding* them to remember all of Jesus' teachings.⁴⁸ In the Christian patristic theology, the paraclete merges with the Spirit, who according to the doctrine of Christian faith is one person of the triune God, thereby representing the relation of the divine and history in a particular, i. e. *ethical* trope.

For a Messianic as well as for a Paracletic paradigm of theology, remembrance is thus a crucial practice that critical political ethics must reflect upon. It entails a summons to remember the lives of those whose dreams were betrayed by violence, murder, and structures of injustice. In other words, *critical political ethics is connected to a theology of history that centers on the ethics of remembrance as remembrance of the past and the future to come.* Theology must not forget or ignore that faith is a response to the summons and promise of God, a response in the act of testimony and witnessing. One cannot justify hope by proving it like assertoric claims, as the discourse on faith and reason suggests. In order to justify one's hope one must live up to it by, as Benjamin would say, resistance to the myths of conformity and complicity with injustice. Following those leaders – political or religious – who want the citizens or faithful merely to be obedient, complacent, and quiet, often means to become indifferent to the suffering that is inflicted exactly by those in power: the dictators, presidents, popes, bishops, legislators, or judges. The virtues for the struggle against blind obedience, complacency, and indifference to the tragedies of others are indeed captured in the cardinal virtues of courage, strength, prudence, and the sense for justice; all of which Benjamin references, albeit only in passing. Theology, however, sees them as central dispositions to act, and adds to them the virtues of faith, hope, and love as habits, not just beliefs.

Benjamin's concept of history breaks with universal history *and* with the understanding of redemption as conditioned on an act of faith. It emphasizes that "redemptive" acts, symbolized by the work of the historian who gathers the fragments of history that are otherwise forgotten, are acts of justice. In both of these shifts, the critique of universal history, and the reinterpretation of the works of justice, his interpretation is indispensable.

48 Cf. the *Gospel of John, Farewell Speeches*, Ch. 13–17, in which the paraclete is introduced.

3. *The Challenge to Remember the Past*

After the war had ended and the crimes against humanity that the Nazis had committed were publicly revealed, the world was shocked about the excesses of violence under Hitler. The United Nations were established as successor of the League of Nations, and Germany was divided between the four Allied Forces. By the mid-1950s, West Germany was already back on its feet, with a restored infrastructure, a strong economy, and a new generation of people who did not grow up anymore with Hitler's propaganda. Yet, the political realism that ruled the day meant that most Germans were uneager to turn to the past and account for their actions – or inaction. Walter Benjamin's writings were republished (or, in part, published for the first time) in 1955. His intense writing style resonated with those philosophers and theologians in West Germany who yearned for a radical critique of the amnesia in postwar German culture. Benjamin showed how historical memory could be conceived of theologically as well, and as such, it was taken up in Metz's political theology. Benjamin's remembrance of the Jewish theological tradition was, however, precarious: anti-Judaism prevailed in many theological works, especially those that still considered supersessionism as a valid concept of the Jewish-Christian relationship. Metz claimed that Benjamin was right: reconciliation cannot be separated from the underlying concept of divine justice. Theology must therefore clarify the relationship of divine and historical justice – and not merely the relationship of divine law and positive law, as political theory and theory of laws have done. Yet, there is a distance between the two authors that must not be brushed over: in the 1930s, Benjamin lived an existence on the fringes of society in France, ripped of his German citizenship as a Jew, with only scattered work and no prospect of a career. He was detained in France, lived impoverished and in ill health over the last years of his life, becoming completely dependent on the financial support of his colleagues and friends, especially Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno who had emigrated to the USA earlier. Benjamin committed suicide before he could be deported. In contrast, the only sixteen year-old Metz was drafted to Hitler's army at the end of the war. Due to mere luck, he survived a deadly bomb attack as the only person of more than a hundred young people in his division.⁴⁹ Justice, forgiveness, reconciliation, this means, are

49 Metz writes: "In meiner Biographie signalisiert Auschwitz einen Schrecken jenseits aller vertrauten Theologie, einen Schrecken, der jede situationsfreie Rede von Gott leer und blind erscheinen lässt. Gibt es denn, so fragte ich mich, einen Gott, den man mit dem Rücken zu einer solchen Katastrophe anbeten kann? Und kann Theologie, die diesen Namen verdient, ungerührt nach einer solchen Katastrophe einfach weiterreden, von Gott und von den Menschen weiterreden, als ob angesichts einer solchen Katastrophe nicht die unterstellte Unschuld unserer menschlichen Worte zu überprüfen wäre? Durch solche Fragen solle Auschwitz nicht etwa zu einem 'negativen Mythos' stilisiert werden, der diese Katastrophe ja wieder unserer theologischen und

concepts that could not be escaped; they always linger in the background of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, and Jews and Christians. In this relationship it all depends to attend to where and what position in society people speak from or from which position they are addressed.⁵⁰

The new political theology was, first and foremost, the attempt to respond to the Shoah. The memory of this particular history became the lens through which Metz developed his concept of dangerous memory – crucially, it reverses the positions well-known from the history of anti-Judaism and antisemitism. Now, in contrast, Christians must not “forget and forgive” that it was, among others, fellow Christians who murdered the Jews or passively stood by when Jews were declared to have a subhuman status while Germans were declared a superior race. The 19th and early 20th century science of race connects the European history with the US history of science in multiple ways. Given the surge of white nationalism and white supremacy in recent years, it is of utmost importance that Christian theology examines the genealogy of whiteness in connection with Western Christianity. The particular connection between the German and the American history goes deep, not the least because it concerns the myth of whiteness that was connected to biological race studies – it resulted in the *racial habitus*, i. e. the habitus of superiority and the assumption of inferiority of any group that does not fit the description of what whiteness means, however changing and shifting this may be.⁵¹ The US racism dehumanized African Americans, Native Americans, and other nonwhite minorities similar to how German racism dehumanized Jews – and as antisemitism has always existed in the USA, so has racism against ethnic minorities always existed in Germany. An ethics of memory that attends to suffering must therefore not brush over the memory of perpetrators – both belong necessarily together – and must always and necessarily inquire of one’s power and position in the conversation. The reckoning with the subscription of so many Germans to Hitler’s ideology of world supremacy, and their active participation in the discrimination, ghettoization, deportation, and then mur-

historischen Verantwortung entzogen hätte. Es ging primär um die beunruhigende Frage: Warum sieht man der Theologie diese Katastrophe – wie überhaupt die Leidensgeschichte der Menschen – so wenig oder überhaupt nicht an?“ J. B. METZ (in Zusammenarbeit mit Johan Reikerstorfer), *Memoria Passionis. Ein provozierendes Gedächtnis in pluralistischer Gesellschaft*, Freiburg i. Br. 42011, 93 f.

50 In chapter 12 of this volume, I show that this is indeed of utmost importance, turning to the case of Martin Heidegger in relation to Emmanuel Levinas and Paul Celan. Because I understand interactions and intersubjectivity as address and response, the position one has (or takes) matters for the concept of responsibility, too.

51 For an analysis of how arbitrary the criteria are cf. L. M. ALCOFF, *Latino/as, Asian Americans, and the Black-White Binary*, in: *The Journal of Ethics* 7/1 (2003), 5–27.

dering of Jews renders it *morally* impossible to appeal to God's justice without the acknowledgment of reparations.⁵² Worse even, handing over one's responsibility to God for "the suffering of the world" adds insult to injury. In the case of Germany, many of the Nazi murderers lived a "good life" in Germany or in self-chosen exiles, while the survivors of the Shoah had to wait for decades to even be granted the most minimal reparations by the German state.

Metz's theology made Christianity's and Judaism's kinship *visible*, both as a critique and as a vision how to proceed. He did not shy away from condemning Christianity's *distortion* of the theological testimony of faith, love, and hope in its history. And while the task of recognizing this particular past of anti-Judaism and racism is nowhere more important than in Germany,⁵³ the profound challenge for Christian theology is often ignored. Metz's theological understanding of time as *kairos* or 'limited time' (*befristete Zeit*) and the theological revelation in history as an apocalyptic moment of decision is a direct response to Benjamin's Thesis.⁵⁴ "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule," Benjamin had written, turning Carl Schmitt's thesis upside down. "We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight."⁵⁵

From today's perspective, this insight is still true, however radical it may sound, and it serves as a guide to understand the social, political, and ecological catastrophes that we witness today. Seen in light of Benjamin's philosophy, for example, the ecological catastrophe is not merely the collateral damage of an otherwise well-designed progressing history; exploitation and reification has been at the heart of modern industrial capitalism since the 19th century. Modern life exploits the earth together with the "bottom billion" who are the victims of the ecological destruction and the inaction of past and present generations. The alienation that Marx foresaw has threatened the moral integrity of whole generations who surrendered to their own resignation, indifference, and complacency. Furthermore, in light of today's consumer culture, one cannot but be reminded of Adorno's and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.⁵⁶ Those who would have the

52 The question of reparations is also one of the stumbling blocks in the American culture; both Native Americans and African Americans are met with rejection and objections to their claims.

53 Cf. B. KRONDORFER/K. VON KELLENBACH/N. RECK, *Mit Blick auf die Täter: Fragen an die deutsche Theologie nach 1945*, Gütersloh 2006; K. VON KELLENBACH/B. KRONDORFER/N. RECK, *Von Gott reden im Land der Täter: Theologische Stimmen der dritten Generation seit der Shoa*, Darmstadt 2001.

54 For a theology of interruption indebted to Metz cf. L. BOUVEN, *God Interrupts History. Theology in a Time of Upheaval*, New York 2007. For the analysis of political theology cf. chapter 10 in this volume.

55 W. BENJAMIN, *On the Concept of History*, 392, Thesis VIII.

56 TH. ADORNO/M. HORKHEIMER, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, London 2016 (orig. 1944).

power and the opportunity to act are lured into living their lives privately; their moral sense is numbed by the distractions of an entertainment and consumer industry that mostly ignores Benjamin's warning: "There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism".⁵⁷ Over against this threat of conformism, depoliticization, and privatization of moral agency, critical political ethics is connected to those political theologies that question the current political and economic order, which are "theologies of the street" instead of theologies practiced in churches and private homes only,⁵⁸ and which are oriented towards the transformation of unjust structures into more just ones.

Studying the works – and voices – of liberation, black, postcolonial, decolonial, feminist, and womanist or *mujerista* theology from the perspective of today, political theology and ethics does not stop with the critique of antijudaism. It must show how Western theology has shaped the habitus of coloniality – and how itself has been shaped by the habitus of racism. Critical political ethics must therefore become more radical than the New Political Theology of the 1960s and 1970s and emphasize the ramifications of Christianity's own whiteness and white superiority. Moral judgments are shaped by the habits and norms we inherit. Bryan Massingale states this aptly with his view on US Catholic ethics:

U.S. Catholic ethical reflection, if it is to be adequate and effective, must adopt a structural and systemic approach to racism. This means approaching this social evil as a cultural phenomenon, that is, as an underlying color symbol system that (1) justifies race-based disparities; (2) shapes not only behavior, but also one's identity and consciousness; and (3) often operates at a preconscious or nonrational level that escapes personal awareness. Effective moral analysis and action require understanding racism as a culture of white advantage, privilege, and dominance that has derivative personal, interpersonal, and institutional manifestations.⁵⁹

Yet, upon examining the stance of the Catholic Church in the USA on racism, Massingale concludes:

It is difficult not to conclude that Catholic engagement with racism is a matter of low institutional commitment, priority, and importance. If "passion" connotes commitment, involvement, and fervor, the Catholic stance on racism, in contrast [to abortion which the Catholic Church passionately opposes, as Massingale remarks], can be characterized as tepid, lukewarm, and half-hearted. Standing against racism is not a core component of Catholic corporate identity.⁶⁰

Critical political ethics, this means, must join the work of decolonizing the practices, structures, and habits that keep the current unjust order from faltering. The

57 W. BENJAMIN, *On the Concept of History*, 392, Thesis VII.

58 J. BALDWIN, *Taking It to the Streets: Public Theologies of Activism and Resistance*, Lexington 2019.

59 B. MASSINGALE, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, Maryknoll, NY 2010, 42.

60 *Ibid.*, 77.

habitus of coloniality⁶¹ undergirds not only the latent supremacy of American and European policies; it also continues to “forget and forgive” its own history of power, supremacy, and cruelty.

Hence, the “soul” or essence of white culture is a worldview that – when it adverts to itself – sees itself as the measure of what is real, standard, normative, and/or normal. White culture is a perspective that measures, but is seldom measured; studies, but is rarely studied; analyzes, but is not often analyzed; evaluates, but is typically not evaluated.⁶²

For the radical change in theology that needs to happen, I believe that Benjamin’s concept of history and his ethics of remembrance is needed even if, as I would like to argue, a Paracletic theology, or theology of the Spirit, is better equipped than the Messianic theology to connect justice and history. Critical political ethics is well-advised to follow Benjamin’s insistence on justice; after all, it is informed by the prophetic remembrance of God who stood with his people because they were suffering and oppressed.

61 W. MIGNOLO, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*, Durham, NC 2018.

62 B. MASSINGALE, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, 22.

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