

## Chapter 10

# Politics, Religion and Violence: The Maccabean Wars

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The world is full of violence committed in the name of religion. Where does this violence come from? What has it to do with religion? This is the question to which this chapter will be dedicated. I speak from an Egyptologist's or antiquarian's point of view; I am asking for origins, not for contemporary movements, let alone for the future of religion. I will be going back in time, asking for the earliest occurrences of genuinely religious violence and their historical circumstances.

One source, perhaps the decisive one, seems to me to consist in the polarising power of religion, dividing humanity in Jews and gentiles, Christians and non-Christians, believers and non-believers, Muslims and Hindus, Catholics and Protestants, Sunnites and Shi'ites, orthodox and heretics, and it seems that the closer these groups are to each other, the greater the violence that might arise between them. As the driving force behind these divisions and subdivisions, I identified (in my book *Moses the Egyptian*) a new concept of absolute religious truth, based on a new distinction between truth and untruth which I called "The Mosaic Distinction," because I held that it was only monotheism that introduced this distinction into the realm of religion (Assmann 1997). This thesis met with much resistance, and indeed: why should truth have anything to do with violence? An additional element is needed to explain the transformation of truth into violence, i.e. the transformation of the distinction between true and false religion into that of friend and foe.

As to the distinction between friend and foe, Carl Schmitt is the authority to turn to. Carl Schmitt was a professor of constitutional law in Bonn and Berlin who later became the court lawyer as it were of the Third Reich. As such, he is a highly problematic figure and his theories are to be handled very cautiously. The distinction

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between friend and foe, however, is expounded by Schmitt in a book titled *Der Begriff des Politischen* – “On the concept of the Political” – that first appeared in 1928, thus 5 years before the Nazis came to power. I am using the second edition, published in 1932 and constantly reprinted until today (Schmitt 1979). I do not agree with Schmitt who saw in the distinction of friend and foe the principle of the political. For a theory of political violence, however, I think Schmitt has opened up a very promising approach. Let us, therefore, have a closer look at Schmitt’s argumentation.

Schmitt defines the political as the polarizing principle, dividing people into friend and foe. His thesis is that humans associate and dissociate automatically according to this distinction. In normal life, however, this principle remains hidden. The other appears as different and not-belonging, but not as “foe.” We negotiate with the others, form contracts, cooperate and communicate in the most various ways. It is only the case of emergency (“*Ernstfall*”), the case of war, that lays bare the true character of the principle of association and dissociation. In this argumentation, the concept of “*Ernstfall*,” case of emergency, is decisive. In what follows, I shall use the German word “*Ernstfall*,” because of its association with the word *ernst* – literally: the case of seriousness, when things turn serious, a notion that is much closer to what Schmitt has in mind than the term “emergency” which, in German, would correspond to “*Notfall*.” The concept of “*Ernstfall*” belongs to the radical style of thought that was typical of this time of expressionism and existentialism, especially in Germany. In the same way as Heidegger defined life as “being toward death” (*Sein zum Tode*, or *Vorlauf zum Tode*, precursion toward death), Schmitt defines the political or the state as “being toward war.” The truth of existence does not reveal itself in normal life but in the case of emergency, the *Grenzsituation* (boundary situation), as Jaspers put it. We are dealing here with a logic of escalation that defines the essence or nature of something with regard to its extreme state of intensity. The existentialist style of thought seems strange to us today, but for our question concerning the roots of violence, the logic of escalation and the concept of *Ernstfall* seem very useful. Before the outbreak of violence comes a process of escalation when an existing distinction turns into polarization and polarization into open hatred and enmity. Convince people that the *Ernstfall* is imminent and they will be ready for every sacrifice, forget all otherwise important bonds and differences and know only friend and foe, against whom they are resolved to fight with all their might.

Schmitt proceeds in two steps. In a first step, he wants to isolate the political as an autonomous cultural sphere by means of defining a specific difference vis à vis other cultural spheres. Such spheres are based on distinctions such as good and evil constituting the moral sphere; just and unjust, the sphere of law; gain and cost, the sphere of economy; truth and error, the sphere of science; art and non-art, the sphere of art; belief and unbelief, the sphere of religion; and friend or foe, that of politics.<sup>1</sup> Such distinctions facilitate observation; they permit to identify, e.g., what can pass

<sup>1</sup>The sociologist Niklas Luhmann speaks with regard to these differentiations or distinctions of „Leitunterscheidungen“: „Ein Code ist eine Leitunterscheidung, mit der ein System sich selbst und sein eigenes Weltverhältnis identifiziert“ (Luhmann 2000, 65).

for political, or moral, or aesthetic action; they produce meaning and make appear as rational an action that would otherwise be ununderstandable. Max Weber, Niklas Luhmann and other theorists of modernity saw in these processes of differentiation the hallmark of modernity. These cultural spheres relativize each other: this is the new polytheism that Max Weber saw coming. For this reason, Schmitt defines modernity as “the age of neutralizations and de-politicizations.”

Yet Schmitt does not halt here. He does not only want to define, but to overcome modernity. For him, therefore, it is not sufficient to identify “the political” as an autonomous cultural domain, standing with equal right alongside the other domains. Rather, he wants to subordinate the other domains to the political.

With his distinction between friend and foe, he argues not for the *autonomy* but for the *hegemony* of the political. “The political,” he writes,

can draw its force from the most various domains of human life, from religious, economical, moral and other oppositions; it does not denote a domain of its own but rather the degree of intensity that an association or dissociation of humans may take on, whose motives may be of a religious, national, economical or other nature. [...]. The real opposition of friend and foe is so strong and decisive that non-political, purely religious, purely cultural differences and motives fade into the background. In any event, political is an association under the sign of the *Ernstfall*. This, therefore, is the relevant, decisive form of human association. (Schmitt 1979, 38f.)

The “real possibility of the association according to friend and foe,” Schmitt adds, suffices to create beyond the purely social a normative form of unity that is something specifically different and decisive vis à vis the other associations. In reality, there is no political ‘society’ or ‘association,’ there is only one political unity, one political community (Schmitt 1979, 45). This is Schmitt’s definition of the difference between *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*, society and community. Community is society under the conditions of the *Ernstfall*. The political, for this reason, is the totalizing principle overruling all other associations and spheres, on whatever distinctions they are based. In this treatise, Schmitt pleads for the total state that corresponds to the totalizing hegemony of the political.

It is the *Ernstfall* that grants the political this priority. Under the conditions of the *Ernstfall*, association becomes friendship, dissociation becomes enmity, society becomes community. *Ernstfall* means war; the war is the hour of truth, where the reality of existence which is hidden in normal life, becomes revealed. The war reveals – to reveal, in Greek, is *apokalyptein* – the true nature of human community that has therefore to be defined with regard to war. With these arguments, Schmitt is fighting against modern liberalism and the differentiation of modern civilization into autonomous spheres such as art and science, law and economy, politics and religion. He wants the whole human being, the united people, the total state. Under normal, everyday conditions, the liberal differentiation of autonomous cultural spheres may be in order, but normality is an illusion that conceals the true nature and order of things. Only when things turn serious, in the *Ernstfall*, do reality and truth show their true face, and reality and truth must be the yardstick of conceptual clarity.

This much about Carl Schmitt on the political and its polarizing power. We know to which terrible outbreaks of murderous violence this concept of the total state has led. Let us now ask for what we may learn from this analysis about our question

concerning religion and that kind of violence that emerges from its specific polarizing power. It is obvious that religions also may unite and separate, associate and dissociate people. Moreover, it is obvious that these unions and separations are intensifiable and may assume different and at times dangerous degrees of intensity. It follows that there should exist also here a kind of *Ernstfall* in the light of which the criterion of association and dissociation takes on the character of friend and foe and leads to the outbreak of violence.

The first candidate for a specifically religious *Ernstfall* that comes to mind is the idea of the wrath of God that either has already discharged itself in a terrible catastrophe or is imminent after some terrible religious crime. The history of religion is full of examples of divine wrath and punishment. Especially rich in this respect is the Hebrew Bible, beginning with the story of the Golden Calf, continuing with endless massacres and punishments up to the fall of Jerusalem (Miggelbrink 2002; Fichtner 1954). All these Biblical examples fulfil two criteria that place them into the political sphere. First, they all belong within the frame of the idea of the covenant, the political alliance that God and the people have formed, where religious crime takes on the political character of defection, the break of a treaty. Secondly, all of them imply the employment of *human* violence that fights for God by identifying and eliminating the defectors as enemies of God. This latter trait distinguishes this kind of violence from, e.g. the 10 Egyptian plagues by which God forces Pharaoh to let his people go. This is purely divine violence, humans do not intervene and there is no mention of divine wrath, no more than on the occasion of those other punishing actions of God before the covenant: the expulsion of Adam and Eve from paradise, the banishment of Cain, the flood, the confusion of languages, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. No mention of divine wrath here, no human intervention. This human violence, however, is exactly what we are interested in and this appears only after entering the covenant at Mt. Sinai.

According to the unanimous opinion of biblical scholars, the foundational text of biblical covenant theology is the book of Deuteronomy. It is here and in the most prominent place within this absolute centerpiece of Israelite religion that we meet with the distinction between friend and foe:

I am JHWH, thy god, who brought thee out of the land of Mizrayim, from the house of bondage.

Thou shalt have no other gods beside me.

Thou shalt not make for thyself any carved idol, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them nor serve them, for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, punishing the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing mercy to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

And again in the closing formula of the decalogue:

Know therefore that the Lord, thy God, he is God, the faithful god, who keeps covenant and truth with those who love him and keep his commandments; and repays them that hate him to their face, to destroy them. (Dtn 7.9–10).

The wrath of God springs from his jealousy which in its turn is associated with the ideas of covenant and loyalty that both partners of the covenant swore each other. This jealousy, *qin'ah*, in Hebrew, is a political affect that also motivates human action. God's jealousy and human zeal are expressed in Hebrew by the same word, *qin'ah*, in Greek, *zēlos*. By *qin'ah* are driven both the jealous God, *El-Qanna'*, and the *qana'im*, who appropriate God's jealousy. This mirroring relationship between divine jealousy and human zeal finds its particularly clear expression in the story of Pinhas, the model of zealotry. Near the end of their 40 years of wandering through the wilderness, the Israelites built their camp at Shittîm, socialized with the men and especially women of Moab and took part in a feast in honor of Ba'al Pe'or, the local god. Furious about this act of infidelity, God sends a plague that kills 24,000 people and only desists from his rage when Pinhas spears his compatriote Zimri and a Midianite woman in the act of making love. "And the lord spoke to Moshe saying.

Pinhas, the son of Eleasar, the son of Aaron the priest has turned my wrath away from the children of Yisra'el, in that he was zealous for my sake among them, that I consumed not the children of Yisrael in my jealousy. (Num 25.11)

I am focussing here not on the plague and its 24,000 victims; this is normal, so to speak, in the ancient world. I am focusing on the deed of Pinhas who intervenes spontaneously for God: this is new, even revolutionary and would have been impossible, I presume, in any other ancient culture.

The ideas of covenant and loyalty, in which the concepts of divine jealousy and human zeal are rooted, belong to the political sphere. From this source, therefore, originates the corresponding form of religious violence, zealotry. This results from recent research of Near Eastern sources. To a large degree, the biblical concepts of covenant and loyalty are adopted from Neo-Assyrian royal ideology (Otto 1999; Steymans 1995). Hittite and Assyrian vassal treaties and loyalty oaths served as models for the structure and content of Deuteronomy and deuteronomistically inspired texts dealing with covenant and covenant ideology. Some passages seem almost verbatim translations of Assarhaddon's loyalty oaths. Even the Hebrew term *b'rit* "covenant" seems to translate the Assyrian *adê*, being a term for the alliance that not only Esarhaddon forms with his subjects and vassals but that also god Assur forms with Esarhaddon. In these oaths, absolute and exclusive loyalty is required, of all heart, soul and power, and apostasy is sanctioned by severest punishment.

We are dealing with the transposition of an originally political concept from the political to the religious level, transforming god-king, king-subject and king-vassal relations into the relations between god and man as well as god and Israel. This, however, means less a *translation* than an *inversion* of the original model. The conqueror who forces a conquered people into vassaldom turns into a liberator who offers the liberated people a treaty that it is free to accept or reject. Loyalty becomes fidelity, vassaldom becomes covenant and politics becomes religion.

This is the temporal, political, ideological and social context in which the idea of the covenant together with its semantics of unconditioned fidelity and loyalty arose. The temporal frame is defined by Israel's dependency on Assyria, the Northern Kingdom at the end of the eighth and the Southern Kingdom in the seventh century

until its fall in 587 BCE under the Babylonians who succeeded the Assyrians.<sup>2</sup> Otherwise the textual borrowings of the Deuteronomy texts from Assyrian models cannot be explained. We are thus referred to a period of extreme suffering and pressure, full of violence and distress, full, moreover, of political tension. In Deuteronomy and deuteronomistic history we perceive the voice of an opposition, protesting against the royal policy of compromise and religious syncretism.

Up to here, however, we are moving more in the realm of literature and ideas than in the realm of history that forms its context but not its content. There is no evidence whatsoever for these scenes of violence exerted in the name of God of having any relation to historical events. The case seems different, however, when in the year 165 BCE an incident occurred that explicitly repeated the exploit of Pinhas. Mattathias the high-priest was ordered by an officer, representative of the Seleucid government, to perform a pagan sacrifice; he refused, risking his life, but saw that another Jew hurried ahead to carry out the required rite.

And when Mattathias saw it, his zeal was kindled, and his heart quivered (with wrath); and his indignation burst forth for judgment, so that he ran and slew him on the altar; and at the same time he [also] killed the king's officer who had come to enforce the sacrificing, pulled down the altar, and [thus] showed forth his zeal for the Law, just as Phinehas had done in the case of Zimri the son of Salom. And Mattathias cried out with a loud voice in the city, saying, "Let everyone that is zealous for the Law and that would maintain the covenant come forth after me!" And he and his sons fled unto the mountains, and left all that they possessed in the city. (1 Makk 2, 24–28)

That is the beginning of the Maccabean revolt and the origin of zealotry, not as a literary motif but a historical movement.

It appears, according to the books of Maccabees and in Josephus Flavius, that in Jerusalem, during the first decades of the 2nd century the elite became inclined toward reform and toward opening the Jewish religion to inter-national, Hellenistically stamped culture (Signori 2012; Hengel 1988). In pursuing these goals, they cooperated with the Seleucid government and pushed the king to issue a decree prohibiting the performance of the Jewish laws by penalty of death:

that they should cease the [...] sacrifices, and drink offerings in the sanctuary, and that they should profane the Sabbaths and feasts, [...] and that they should sacrifice swine and [other] unclean animals; and that they should leave their sons uncircumcised, and make themselves abominable by means of [practicing] everything that was unclean and profane, so that they might forget the Law, and change all the [traditional] ordinances. And whosoever should not act according to the word of the king, should die... (1 Makk 1, 41–53)<sup>3</sup>

This is the historical situation that constituted the *Ernstfall* grouping the Jewish people into friend and foe and leading to a civil war. For Yehuda Maccabee fought not only a war of resistance against the Seleucid occupation, but also a civil war against his own people, extinguishing – if we may believe 1 Macc – the life of whole Jewish towns that adopted the “common way of life” (*ho koinós bios*, after Josephus).

<sup>2</sup>We may even limit the time of composing Deuteronomy to the time period between 672, the date of the loyalty oaths of Esarhaddon, and 612, the end of the Assyrian Empire (see Otto 2007, 119).

<sup>3</sup>The authenticity of this decree is, however, highly contestable see Weitzman 2004.

In the same way as his father Mattathias followed the example of Pinhas, Yehuda ha-Makkabi based his strategy on Deuteronomy chapters 13 and 20.

In Deuteronomy chapter 20, a distinction is drawn between normal and annihilatory warfare. Normal rules of war apply to distant cities that must be offered peace and submission before starting the siege; in the case of conquest, the male population may be killed, the women and children be enslaved and booty be taken.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, Canaanite cities that are nearby are not to be offered submission but must be conquered and put under the ban.<sup>5</sup> This means that nothing living is to be left alive and no booty is to be taken, but everything must be burnt in order to avoid contamination with Canaanite paganism. Chapter 13 prescribes the same treatment to Hebrew cities that have abandoned the law and have taken up Canaanite mores.<sup>6</sup> Yehuda and his followers see in the emerging Hebrew Bible, the “scripture,” already the highly normative codification of the will of God that has to be executed with fervent zeal.

To be zealous, however, does not only mean being ready to kill; it also means being ready to die. Martyrdom (in Hebrew: *qiddush ha-shem*, “sanctifying the name”) is an innovation in the history of religion; not on the literary level where one could perhaps refer to the tradition of the ‘servant of God’ in Is 53 but at any rate on the level of history.<sup>7</sup> This has to be seen in close correlation with another innovation that coincides precisely with the Maccabean movement, a new concept of *Ernstfall*

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<sup>4</sup> “When you draw near to a town to fight against it, offer it terms of peace. If it accepts your terms of peace and surrenders to you, then all the people in it shall serve you at forced labor. If it does not submit to you peacefully, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it; and when the Lord your God gives it into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword. You may, however, take as your booty the women, the children, livestock, and everything else in the town, all its spoil. You may enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which the Lord your God has given you. Thus you shall treat all the towns that are very far from you, which are not towns of the nations here.” (Deut 20, 10–15)

<sup>5</sup> “But as for the towns of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive. You shall annihilate them – the Hittites and the Ammorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites – just as the Lord your God has commanded, so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against the Lord your God.” (Deut 20, 15–18)

<sup>6</sup> “If you hear it said about one of the towns that the Lord your God is giving you to live in, that scoundrels from among you have gone out and led the inhabitants of the town astray, saying, ‘Let us go and worship other gods,’ whom you have not known, then you shall inquire and make a thorough investigation. If the charge is established that such an abhorrent thing has been done among you, you shall put the inhabitants of that town to the sword, utterly destroying it and everything in it – even putting its livestock to the sword. All of its spoil you shall gather into its public square; then burn the town and all its spoil with fire, as a whole burnt offering to the Lord your God. It shall remain a perpetual ruin, never to be rebuilt. Do not let anything devoted to destruction stick to your hand, so that the Lord may turn from his fierce anger and show you compassion, and in his compassion multiply you, as he swore to your ancestors, if you obey the voice of the Lord your God by keeping all his commandments that I am commanding you today, doing what is right in the sight of the Lord your God.” (Deut 13, 13–19)

<sup>7</sup> For the Jewish concept of martyrdom *Martyriums* (*kiddush ha-shem*, “sanctifying the name”), see Lenzen 1995.

and revelation: the concept of paradise and the implied distinction between salvation and damnation. This distinction belongs within the frame of another semantics quite different from that of covenant theology, and the correspondent idea of *Ernstfall* is not the spontaneous wrath of god, reaction to transgressions against the alliance, but the idea of a last judgment, the judgment of the world at the end of time, when God draws the last distinction between friend and foe, assigning the friends to paradise and the foes to hell.

It seems to me anything but a mere coincidence that the year 165 BCE saw not only the outbreak of the Maccabean revolt but also the emergence of Jewish apocalypticism. In this year, the Book of Daniel was written, the earliest apocalyptic text in Jewish tradition. For the apocalyptic semantics, the decisive scene, besides the two dreams revealing the course of history until the end of time, seems to me to be the writing on the wall with the image of the balance, on which Nebuchadnezzar is found to be too light and is discarded. This is the balance on which the world will be weighed and judged. Revelation means the disclosure of the *Ernstfall*, and this consists in the end and the judgment of the world as it is described or revealed in Matthew 25 and the revelation of John. It is decisive that the *Ernstfall* is revealed as immediately imminent.

He who knows what the bell tolls sees himself confronted with the decision to join the side of salvation or that of damnation. Now, in the light of this confrontation, the principle of religious association and dissociation reaches, in the words of Carl Schmitt, its 'highest degree of intensity.' In the framework of the new semantics of apocalypticism, martyrdom provides the chance to opt, with only one step, for the side of salvation and to immediately enter paradise (Agus 1988). If we understand revelation in this precise sense of apocalypse, revelation appears to be a totalizing principle, deriving its totalizing power from the real possibility of the last judgment. The concept of 'total religion' means a religion that claims hegemonic control of the whole of culture and the individual human being in the same way as Carl Schmitt defined the concept of the 'total state,' and that bases its claim on its specific religious idea of *Ernstfall*, the apocalypse or revelation. This concept establishes religion both as an autonomous and a hegemonic sphere dominating and controlling all the other cultural spheres.

We now see more clearly, I think, what could be defined as *Ernstfall* in the realm of religion and can now distinguish two concepts of *Ernstfall*: one is the covenant concept according to which the *Ernstfall* is imminent when a religious crime, a break of covenant in the eyes of god, occurred; this type of *Ernstfall* consists in the wrath of God. The other and much more radical type is the concept of apocalypse where the *Ernstfall* is defined as the end of the world and the Last Judgment. In the same way as politics in the Schmittian definition, religion, too, appears as a matter of identity and belonging, of association and dissociation, the only but decisive difference being that God is included as a partner.

Under the condition of the *Ernstfall*, religion – in the same way as politics – raises a totalizing claim, requiring hegemony over all the domains of culture. This applies even to politics; the political form of total religion is theocracy.

This form of religion is based on another radical innovation in history, the idea of 'God's own or Chosen people.' Belonging to or being loyal to God is the same as being loyal to and belonging to the 'people of God.' The criterion of belonging is in Judaism the law and in Christianity the faith. A Jew is he who keeps the laws, *shomer ha-mitzvôt*, a Christian he who believes in Christ. In Christian perspective, both criteria are closely connected because believing in Christ (*pistis*) is held to be the fulfilment, end and goal (*telos*) of the law (*nomos*). All this is about association and dissociation with or from God and – at the same time – with or from his people. This is the general and normal structure of this type of religion. Under the condition of the *Ernstfall*, in the frame of either covenantal or apocalyptic semantics, it is susceptible to intensification up to its highest degree of total religion. In the Hebrew Bible, covenantal semantics prevails but there are foreshadowings also of the apocalyptic form. In the New Testament, apocalypticism gains enormously in momentum, and in the Qur'an, the semantics of apocalypticism, the discourse of judgment, salvation and damnation, hell and paradise, as well as of God's friends and foes, is all-prevailing.<sup>8</sup>

Given the challenge of globalization and the dangers of a world drifting towards a possible 'clash of civilizations,' it seems necessary not only to describe but to overcome the semantics of apocalypticism. It is with this 'deconstructive' interest in mind that I am trying to track down this style of thought to its roots and origins. We have seen its first origins, still in the framework of covenant and wrath of God, in the situation of Assyrian and Babylonian oppression and have identified the conditions of its transformation and apocalyptic intensification in the time of Seleucid oppression that continues in the resistance against Rome.

In conclusion, I would like to consider the role of writing or scripture in this context. According to a Jewish tradition, God sent down from heaven the book and the sword, *sefer ve-sayif*. The Maccabean opposition grasped the sword, the Deuteronomist opposition in the seventh century grasped the book. It produced a text that presents itself as the foundational document of the covenant, *sefer ha-b'rît* oder *sefer ha-torah*, giving rise to an unprecedented process of scriptural codification of the most various normative and narrative traditions, leading eventually to the canon of the Hebrew Bible and, after this model, the Christian Bible and the Qur'an. Writing, the concept of scripture or Holy Writ seems to be a decisive factor in this connection of covenant, revelation, divine wrath and holy zeal that we have tried to analyse with regard to the roots of religious violence.

Also the book seems to be connected to the idea of *Ernstfall*. I am referring to the legend of the finding of the book as told in 2 Kings 22–23. Under King Josiah, during restoration work in the temple, a book is found that turns out to be written by Moses himself, giving a summary of all the rules that have to be observed in order to be allowed a blessed life in the Promised Land and announcing the most terrible punishments in case of abandonment. Since this book was forgotten and the rules neglected, the catastrophe is inevitable. This situation fulfils exactly the definition of the religious *Ernstfall*. The crime is so general and the imminent punishment so

<sup>8</sup> Khalil 2013. I owe this reference to Dorothea Weltecke.

radical that here, the covenantal concept of the *Ernstfall* in the form of the wrath of god assumes apocalyptic traits. To be sure, God does not reveal the end of the world and the imminent judgment, but only issues prescriptions, laws, rules and insists on their codification, memorialization and observation. But the imminent punishment appears so terrible that under these conditions religion takes on another degree of intensification and assumes the traits of a total religion. All the other spheres of culture are subordinated to religion and controlled by the law that forms the basis of the covenant: art by the prohibition of images, law and economy by corresponding regulations, cult by the ritual laws, and, above all, the political, the institution of kingship that is now clearly and completely subordinated under the Torah.

When the king will have ascended to the throne, we read in ch. 17.

He shall write for himself a copy of this Torah in a book out of that which is before the priests the Levites: And it shall be with him and he shall read therein all the days of his life: that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, to keep all the words of this Tora and these statutes, to do them: that his heart be not lifted up above his brethren, and that he turn not aside from this commandment, to the right hand or to the left: to the end that he may prolong his days in his kingdom, he, and his children, in the midst of Israel. (Dtn. 17, 14–20).

Kingship appears here as a more or less necessary evil whose dangers must be contained through scripture as effectively as possible. This, we might conclude, is total religion, not as a historical phenomenon in the time of Josiah, but as an idea arising in that time.

The notion of ‘total religion,’ to emphasize this point once again, does not refer to a specific religion but only to a degree of intensity that any religion that knows of revelation in the form of a codified will of God can assume or various religious movements may proclaim, the Maccabees and other *qana'im* in ancient Judaism, Christianity during several phases of papal predominance in the Middle Ages and also puritan Protestant movements such as Calvin’s and Oliver Cromwell’s theocratic institutions; today, Islamist theocracies and movements confront us with similar manifestations of total religion.

This possibility of turning into a total religion seems to me to be the problem of monotheism. In the pagan world, something like total religion seems impossible. The so-called ‘pagan religions’ were centered on cult, and this cult was often violent and bloody. But they would not polarize people into friend and foe according to the criteria of an orthodoxy, be it that of law or of faith. Wars were waged for reasons of greed or revenge or fear, but not for religious reasons. Ideas of an *Ernstfall* such as apocalypse and the Last Judgment were alien to these religions, and only the idea of an *Ernstfall* – in this I agree with Carl Schmitt – makes totalization possible, on the political as well as on the religious level.

Let me emphasize two points of this reflection on the origins of religious violence. One is the connection between violence and *Ernstfall* as the condition under which the inevitable and everlasting dialectics and dynamics of association and dissociation, identity and difference, inclusion and exclusion turns into the distinction between friend and foe and becomes thereby a totalizing principle. Carl Schmitt discovered this connection in arguing for totalization, but one can use his discovery also in the opposite direction and argue for de-totalization, de-polarization and

de-politicization. This is what I am trying here. In using Schmitt's theory, I am not following but contradicting him. I am following his analysis but drawing the opposite conclusions. What he wants to promote I want to avoid and to deconstruct.

The distinction between friend and foe belongs to the realm of politics and has found its way into religion through the concept of the covenant that Israel adopted from Neo-Assyrian politics. This concept had – and has still – to be de-politicized and de-totalized. Jewish messianism was a step in this direction because it postponed the full political fulfilment of total religion to the end of history. Another anti-totalistic step was Jesus' teaching to "give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's" (Mt 22,21, Mk 12,17, Lk 20,25) and also the sentence "my kingdom is not of this world" (John 18, 36) The Hebrew Bible is in any case safe from overly totalizing readings by virtue of its polyphony.

The other point to retain from this analysis is the connection of revelation and scripture. Already the age of enlightenment discovered a source of intolerance and violence in this alliance. This brings me to Lessing's and Mendelssohn's criticism of scripture (see Assmann 2010). Lessing relativized the authority of scripture against what he called the "spirit" of religion,<sup>9</sup> Mendelssohn relativized the authority of revelation by opposing it to nature and history. For Mendelssohn, Judaism is not a religion of 'revelation' in the Christian sense of the word. "I believe," he writes in his essay *Jerusalem oder Über religiöse Macht und Judentum* – "Jerusalem or On Religious Power and Judaism" (1783), "that Judaism does not know of any revealed religion. The Israelites have laws, commandments, rules of life, instruction about the will of God ... but no general doctrines, no salvific truths, no statements of universal reason. Those, God reveals to us always, in the same way as to all other people, through nature and history but never through language and writing" (Mendelssohn 1989, 407 f.). In Jewish understanding, eternal truths are revealed to *all* mankind through the creation of the world, and they are – at least partially – readable by reason with which God has equipped all human beings. They are a matter of reason and not of faith. They must never be codified in writing. "They were," Mendelssohn writes, "confided to the living, spiritual education that adapts to all the changes of times and circumstances" (Mendelssohn 1989, 420). Only "historical truths" must be written down, but never "eternal truths." The law that God gave or revealed to Moses on Mt. Sinai is such a historical truth that could only survive by means of writing. "Only with regard to historical truths," Mendelssohn writes, "the Highest Wisdom deems it adequate to instruct human beings in human manner, i.e. by speech and writing."<sup>10</sup> The historical truth of the law regards only the Jews, eternal truths regard the whole of humanity. Truths of reason are "*allgemeine Menschenreligion* (the general religion of mankind), not Judaism, and general human religion ... was not to be revealed on Mt. Sinai. Judaism does not boast of any exclusive revelation of eternal truths, of no revealed religion in the general [i.e.: the Christian, J.A.] use of the term."<sup>11</sup> What Mendelssohn is opposing could perhaps

<sup>9</sup>In his controversy with J. M. Goeze see Wieckenberg 2007 and Assmann 2010, 169–172.

<sup>10</sup>ibid., p. 411.

<sup>11</sup>ibid., p. 415.

be called the 'absolutism of difference' which he detects as a dangerous consequence in the Christian idea of revelation. He presents the Jewish concept of revelation as a counter-example that avoids the absolutism of difference by claiming only local or particular validity, thus allowing integration into, or subordination under, the overarching concept of "*Menschenreligion*." For Mendelssohn, '*Menschenreligion*' is synonymous with "natural religion". Whereas natural religion was generally taken as the irreconcilable opposite of revealed religion, Mendelssohn understands both as complimentary concepts. All humans live in a status of double membership, belonging both to their particular religion and to general human religion, the one transmitted to them by scriptural and oral tradition, the other revealed to them by reason, attention and contemplation.

Lessing opposes the absolutism of difference on a much broader scale in his "Masonic dialogues" *Ernst und Falk*. Besides the religious difference which he, like Mendelssohn, attributes to a mistaken concept of revelation, he addresses also political and social differences that negate, destroy and preclude the unity of mankind, the idea of humanity. Lessing's concept of a cosmopolitanism that overcomes the barriers of religion, nation and class, and Mendelssohn's concept of "*Menschenreligion*", religion of mankind, both relate to the idea of 'humanity' in the sense of a trans-religious, trans-confessional, trans-national and trans-hierarchical system of values, needs and properties to which all human beings belong apart from belonging to their specific religion, nation, and class. This overarching level of the unity of humanity breaks the absolutism of difference which precludes tolerance and mutual understanding.

With the idea of humanity, we have come full circle: at the opposite side from Carl Schmitt with whom we started. "Who speaks of humanity," Schmitt states laconically, "wants to deceive."<sup>12</sup> For Schmitt, humanity or mankind does not exist because it excludes the other, the enemy. "If the distinction between friend and foe vanishes, even as a pure possibility," he writes, "all that still exists after this event is de-politicized *Weltanschauung*, culture, civilization, economy, morality, law, art, entertainment etc., but no state, no politics. Humankind as such is unable to wage war, for it has no enemy, at least not on this planet. The concept 'humanity' excludes the concept of enmity."<sup>13</sup> With these words, Schmitt reveals himself as a partisan of what I have called "the absolutism of difference" and as an enemy of any form of "double membership." His arch-enemies are the freemasons, the cosmopolitans, and above all the Jews. Schmitt is the most pronounced exponent of what Thomas Mann has called "the new world of anti-humanism" (*Anti-Humanität*).<sup>14</sup> With the same intensity with which Thomas Mann abhorred "anti-humanity," Schmitt abhorred the idea of humanity because it would destroy all distinctions and differences, above all the distinction between friend and foe, the basis not only for political identity but for identity as such.

<sup>12</sup> BP, 55.

<sup>13</sup> BP, 54 f. The new concepts of human rights and of "crimes against humanity that were developed after WW II prove Schmitt to be wrong. "Humanity" in this sense has no need of enemies.

<sup>14</sup> In a note written on the margin of Goldberg 1925, 49. See Hülshörster 1999.

This last argument, however, is nonsense or propaganda. The concept of humanity excludes neither nationality nor enmity. The natural enemy of the cosmopolitan is not the inhabitant of another planet, as Schmitt assumed, but the unconditional particularist, be it in the sense of nationalism, racism or religious orthodoxy. The concept of humanity does not exclude difference, but the absolutism of difference.

The concept of humanity is frequently denounced as a Western concept and as mere imperialism in disguise. Whether or not the idea is of Western origin, however, is immaterial. What counts is that it is aspired to by East and West, North and South. As soon as the concept of *humanitas* and its values are globally claimed they cease to be Western or Eastern and become universal. It is not the origin but the goal that matters.

Unlike Mendelssohn, we would perhaps not speak of religion – *Menschheitsreligion*, religion of humanity – with respect to the idea of *humanitas*. Instead – and more modestly – we could perhaps speak of a “global civility.” This idea should be understood in purely secular terms. In the course of globalization, we are moving towards a kind of world-society, but not towards a world-religion in the sense of the eighteenth century. There will never be one religion on earth and there will never be any agreement about God – at least before the messianic age. Until then, religion exists only in the plural. Agreement about global civility cannot be based on God and revelation, but on reason and insight. These, however, should not be opposites. The existing religions can easily adopt these principles and to the degree that they are doing so they cease to be agents of polarization and start working as agents of humanization. The less specifically religious the idea of a global civility – human rights and what this idea implies – is, the easier it is for the various religions to lend it support. Violence belongs to the realm not of religion but of politics. Religion appears to be the only power that is strong enough to confront politics, to overcome violence and promote peace, understanding and justice.

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