

Introduction: the sacred and the political

‘Everything begins in mysticism and ends in politics.’

Charles Péguy, *Notre jeunesse*

The brokenness of political reality

In the summer of 1918, Hermann Hesse wrote a short piece entitled ‘War and Peace’. No other intellectual or ethical goal, he claimed, was as difficult to attain as peace. Neither deterrence nor rationality, neither commandments nor propaganda will produce this precious good. Rather, like any progress, it arises from *Erkenntnis*.¹ It is the *Erkenntnis* of

the living [*das Lebendige*] in us, in each of us, in me and you, of a secret magic, a secret divinity, that each of us carries. It is the *Erkenntnis* of the possibility to suspend all contrasts from this internal vantage point; to transform all white into black, all evil into good, all night into day. The Indian says ‘Atman’, the Chinese says ‘Tao’, the Christian says ‘grace’. Where that highest *Erkenntnis* exists (as with Jesus, Buddha, Plato, and Lao Tse) a threshold is passed, behind which the wonders begin. It is there that war and enmity cease. . . For those who live through it the enemy turns into brother, death turns into birth, shame turns into honour, misfortune turns into destiny. Each thing on earth appears double, once as ‘of this world’, and once as ‘not of this world’. ‘This world’, however, means, what is ‘outside us’ . . . With the experience that all this ‘external’ [*Äussere*] is not only the object of our perception but also, simultaneously, the creation of our own soul, with the transformation of the external into the internal, of the world into the I, the dawn breaks. This may appear trivial. But just as every soldier killed is the eternal repetition of a mistake, the truth, in manifold forms, needs to be eternally repeated. (Hesse 1973: 33 – my translation)

Behind the threshold wonders begin. Such wonders might turn the destructive duality of the trenches into unity. Threshold experiences evoke the possibility of overcoming disintegration by an experience of wholeness. Other threshold experiences such as revolutions or

¹ The German term has more than one meaning in English. It refers to knowledge gained from discovery or sudden realisation as much as it does to understanding.

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states of emergency are rare occurrences ‘outside’ the flow of normal, profane, and routinised time. In such threshold experiences, people act, feel, suffer, and hope. Ludwig Wittgenstein’s diary of his army service during World War I notes of the extreme danger: ‘Only then will the war really begin for me. And – maybe – even life. Perhaps nearness of death will bring me the light of life’ (quoted in Monk 1991: 138).

The realisation of a fundamental conversion of values and goals is a communal experience, a cultural and experiential reality, and often a dramatic social event. Experiences of thresholds occur in the interstices between two worlds that are ordinarily closed to each other. The threshold that separates a church or a shrine from the outside profane world, for instance, is the limit and the boundary that distinguishes and opposes two worlds (Eliade 1956: 25). All *Erkenntnis* appears in thousands of ways but only is one truth: the reconciliation of diametrically opposed ethical choices. Destruction and death may not be the end but rather contain the seeds of new beginnings. Quests for the sacred regulate violence and death but they also originate in it. ‘If something sacred [*Heiligtum*] is to be set up, something sacred has to be destroyed’ (Nietzsche 1997, vol. II: 835 – my translation). The tragic past is never closed, as its meaning continues to unfold and retroactively changes in relation to new developments (Halbertal 2012: 92).

The awe-inspiring power of sacrifice can induce non-sacrificial attitudes. Moral imperatives such as atonement and reconciliation express the ethos of compassion and the healing of cultural traumas. Humanitarian government, for instance, can be likened to a new form of political theology (Fassin 2012: 251). Individuals who are aware of the finitude of their individual existence require transcendent images that express the ‘eternity’ of their collective groups and the world. These may refer to God, nature, or civilisation but also to the nation, democracy, the state, or the economy. This experiential dimension is concealed from the empirical gaze of social enquiry. Such experiences may enable acts of conversion. This semblance of wonder is, according to Nietzsche, the key to the phenomenon of the sacred (*das Heilige*) (Nietzsche 1997, vol. II: 612). The wonder consists of the immediate succession of opposites, of conditions of the soul that are evaluated in morally contrasting ways. One could capture how an evil man could become a holy, a good man.

This book argues that such threshold experiences of the *Erkenntnis* of truth have been a recurrent and constitutive condition in politics. Following an emergent tradition of enquiry in anthropology and political theory, it demonstrates how practices of the sacred have shaped secular political frames. It works on the premise that inviolable and inalienable political frames emerge in transitions between historical configurations.

Such transitions are not interruptions of bigger trends such as state centralisation, progress, or modernisation. They are creative of new structures of meaning.

At the core of the political are not simply abstract oppositions such as that between private and public, secular and religious, or friend and enemy. The political rests on communal experiences of participation and active quests for meaning. Politics and the sacred are ‘twin powers’ that are in permanent reciprocal engagement in order to make sense of the extraordinary (Molnar 1988). At the centre of this book, therefore, is a series of enquiries that consider the extraordinary as constitutive of political existence. The extraordinary takes hold of people who have to face the brokenness of political reality. Political modernity, for instance, has not ceased to produce fractures, disintegration, and transgression of boundaries. Such processes occur in collective events such as revolutions, civil wars, or processes of globalisation. The extraordinary can, however, also refer to the ways in which individuals and leaders felt awe in the presence of individuals who lived a life of self-overcoming for the sake of achieving holiness. The most powerful men bowed down in adoration before the saint (*der Heilige*) (Nietzsche 1997, vol. II: 614). They did this because they sensed that behind his frailty there was a superior power, the power of will, which tested itself by efforts of self-overcoming. When adoring saints, princes adored something in themselves. Such a tremendous form of self-denial would not have been desired gratuitously. The powerful learned from the saint a new awe, a new power. Such unconscious and irrational bonds characterise religious assemblies as much as political communities. The participants in religious ritual, for instance, are not experts in faith or religious doctrine. They usually ignore the properties of the rituals and liturgies they participate in. In a similar vein, democrats in secular societies profess acts of faith that are inexpressible in rational arguments, moral values, or intellectualist conceptions of faith. Commonly, democratic governments aim to satisfy expectations, rights, and material needs. By setting inviolable standards such as the rule of law, the indivisibility of the territory, or the moral identity of citizenship, states perform sacral acts and celebrate mysteries. Modern law, for instance, is based on a tension that ‘concerns less the existence of the sacred in law than the proper relation one ought to exhibit toward the law as it is expressed in sacred moments, objects, or regimes of meaning’ (Sarat, Douglas, and Umphrey 2007: 10).

Scholars increasingly recognise that any engagement with structures of the state, sovereignty, the nation, or democracy requires a simultaneous analysis of non-rational modes of action and reflection. Taking the lead from authors such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, or Claude Lefort, this book argues that an enquiry into the sources of power must go beyond the juridico-institutional models of sovereignty, or conceptions that ground power in individual or collective

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volition (Foucault 1977, 1984, Lefort 1986, Agamben 1998). We need to connect the understanding of politics to experiences and practices that sustain legitimating discourses of coercive power, the meanings of policies, or the ideological power of concepts (Asad 2003, Mahmood 2005, Latour 2009, Fassin 2012, Horvath 2013). We have to imagine that bodies, forms of life, and the meaning-making power of existential concerns underpin schemes of politicisation (Foucault 2001: 234). Political enquiry needs to relate such conversion experience to practices of sacrifice, ritualisations of collective identity, and the power of political imagination.

The main goal of this book is to understand how limit situations create values, ideas, and truths that transcend such immanence. As shown by social anthropology, limit situations are liminal conditions, in which individuals and collective groups are in-between dissolution of order and aspirations of remaking order (Horvath, Thomassen, and Wydra 2015). It is within such limit situations that political societies identify sources of order, life, and a sense of community, all of which transcend the institutional fabric of politics. Political origins are often linked to the sacred. Sacrifice of ancestors or soldiers often bind politicians and their governments in their pursuit of national interest. Sovereign states and political collectives alike refer to sacred origins as meaning-giving structures. They do choose to accept representations as veiled reality, unconscious or 'invisible'. Rather than recovering such origins, this book problematises borderline experiences. Following Carl Schmitt's suggestion that 'the definition of sovereignty must ... be associated with a borderline case and not with routine' (Schmitt 2005: 5), this book considers 'borderline cases' as weak moments of the social that mobilise spiritual forces and emotions into action. If politics is the capacity of rulers to order people's lives on a durable basis, it also has to address the spiritual needs of people. Beyond life, security, and prosperity, people desire to know who they are, who they are not, where they belong, and where they do not belong. Sacred canopies provide meaning. They help people to cope with existential fear and meaninglessness in a fragile social world. Immanent limit situations are the experiential background for the creation of potential epistemic truths that sustain claims to collective self-transcendence. Epistemic truths are not foundational; rather, they are historically contingent cultural facts. They also have creative potential in terms of providing new markers of meaning and internal modes of power.

The secular narrative has turned the functional differentiation between state and religion into an ethical imperative, an 'ought' with a normative obligation. The more powerful suggestion, however, is that

limit situations create new sacred spaces and ultimate ends. The 'state creates and maintains its own sacred space and history' (Kahn 2011: 19). Much as in pre-modern societies, citizens in contemporary states require a sacred canopy, a web of symbols and meanings by which they can identify markers of certainty, be they social, ethnic, national, or ideological, in order to overcome voids of meaning. Paradigms such as the national interest, popular sovereignty, or human rights concern the priority of the sacred before the profane. In the 'post-secular age' of the early twenty-first century, the motives and frames for political theology have become nebulous, delocalised, and unclear (de Vries and Sullivan 2006: 28). Formulations such as 'we the people' are increasingly tinged with references to human rights and humanitarian reason. The politics of humanitarian reason professes sensitivity to suffering and victimhood. Yet, victimhood can assume powers of an ideology, a powerful imagination, an 'empire of trauma' (Fassin and Rechtman 2009).

Quests for sacrality in politics are ultimate goals that cannot be rationalised unless we problematise such limit situations. When regularities, hierarchies, and limits of 'normal' politics dissolve, voids of meaning emerge. When political societies are faced with meaninglessness, people seek integration against disintegration, cosmos over chaos. When things fall apart, individuals and collective groups are confronted with limit situations, which in turn become the conditions under which the search for new markers of certainty occurs. While Bolshevik revolutionary messianism predated World War I, it could capture wider circles of Russians only in the dissolution of order of the world war. Ever since Pericles and Abraham Lincoln, the political freedom of citizens in a democratic community has been linked to the sacrifice of other citizens in the battlefield. Such sacrifice in war is interpreted as an aspiration for the future of the community. 'The citizenry in democratic societies needs to convert instances of revolt, civil war, and collective violence into horizons of meaning that transcend such 'originary violence'. In order to keep such authority vacuums outside the constitutional sphere, democratic citizens must abide by inscrutable and veiled truths. Liberal variants of representative democracy carve out their positive attributes in conflict with various constitutive outsides such as imperialism, authoritarianism, or totalitarianism. They also discursively and imaginatively ascertain distinctions between the pure and the impure, the inside and the outside, and the low and the superior.

Rather than conceive of the sacred as a religious doctrine, a metaphysical belief, or a foundational principle of sovereign politics, we may argue that its manifestations are historically contingent across time and are transformative of goals, aspirations, and moral judgments. This book

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therefore does not have a neoconservative agenda nor does it provide a view of modernity as an unfinished project. The aim is not to reject Enlightenment modernity in its entirety nor to propose a new model of the sacred. Taking the stance that the loss of meaning is not a descent into 'meaninglessness', this book problematises limit situations in the spirit of a genealogical mode of enquiry. The adaptive 'functions' of the sacred for politics require attention to frames that are moving, unstable, and transformative. Following Foucault, we have to be 'at the frontiers, at the limits of ourselves' (Foucault 1984: 46). The sacred actively divides the 'before' and the 'after'. It refers to 'positive', redeeming, charismatic experiences of *communitas*. As an experiential and cultural fact, the sacred becomes manifest within, and simultaneously transcends, transgressive dynamics. Such dynamics include revolutions, wars, or processes of globalisation. In other words, the markers of orientation for political societies in sustaining meaningful and coherent moral and symbolic worlds refer us back to limit situations.

Oppositions between the secular and the sacred, between the state and religion, are misleading as they suggest binary oppositions between the inside and the outside, the pure and the impure, the secular and the religious. Rather, this book attempts to grasp the constitutive role of the interstices in which the sacred simultaneously separates and binds, conceals and reveals, distances and approximates. The sacred constitutes shifts of meaning. The inferior may become superior, the powerless may challenge the powerful, the inside makes only sense with an outside, or the ends may be turned into the means. The sacred can be conceived as an emotional urge. Quests for salvation and redemption are strongly felt but hazy aspirations, whose final purpose eludes human beings. Such meanings can only be valid if they are practised, performed, and believed. Such markers of certainty are not gained by deliberation, scrutiny, or critique. The key to collective identity is therefore often in vanishing points or ultimate ends, which transcend the profane reality of measurement and rationality.

In a world of nearly instantaneous global communication and the technological management of bureaucratised states, this may sound counterintuitive. States are primarily concerned with the organisation of material infrastructures of social life, economic prosperity, and territorial security. Scientific progress and the spirit of critique mark a secular age. Under the cold light of empirical facts, the study of the mysteries of power appears meaningless. In an age of the public scrutiny of power, the opposition between good and evil or heaven and earth has little more than rhetorical effects. 'All meaning comes from us. We encounter no echo outside... A race of humans has arisen which has

managed to experience its world entirely as immanent' (Taylor 2007: 376). Such immanent concerns, however, have not abolished people's desire to transcend technological feasibility, economic rationality, brute power, utility, or pleasure. A secular age is not deprived of a sense of the sacred. We still speak of sunset and sunrise. Natural scientists still accept spheres of taboo, which check uncontrolled scientific progress. Mantras such as 'life is sacred' or 'is nothing sacred?' address violations of taboos such as cannibalism, incest, or euthanasia. The more effectively the technological-scientific civilisation in secular societies imposes its laws, therefore, the stronger the relative desire to escape this immanence becomes (Weber 1988).

The limit situations presented in this book deviate and diverge from ordinary politics. They are nevertheless the hinges around which expectations of ultimate ends form. Such ultimate ends can be captured in a variety of cases. This book examines the extraordinary roots of the political imagination, the existential pluralism underlying transcendent frames of collective identity, varieties of political theology, the democratic sacred, the communist imagination, European political identity, the sacred sources of human rights, and the relationship between victimhood and new wars. In all these cases, orientations of action may appear as conflicts between dualistic contrasts. But they also reconcile such contrasts (Giesen 2010: 53–6). Expectations and aspirations are not imposed from an outside agenda or external arbiter but are internally found in a process of communal action. Max Weber's interpretive sociology (*verstehende Soziologie*) saw irrational, affect-based contexts of meaning that influenced behaviour as diversions (*Ablenkungen*) or deviations (*Abweichungen*) from what could be constructed as strictly *zweckrationales Handeln*. *Zweckrational* is commonly translated as 'instrumentally rational' (Weber 2013: 24), but this is inaccurate at the least. Rather, Weber linked *zweckrational* to expectations regarding the behaviour of objects and human beings. These expectations are used as 'conditions' or 'means' for rationally desired ends that can be pondered and evaluated (Weber 1980: 12).

The transformative power of the sacred

Given the wealth of dimensions of the sacred, a coherent narrative of its evolution is far beyond the scope of this book. The task here is not to determine whether political structures always require sacred references in liturgies, myths, or symbols. This book proposes instead a series of enquiries into the modalities by which the political and the sacred constitute each other. While the term 'sacred' is commonly employed in its

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adjectival form, using it here as a noun by no means suggests that problems of political order can be linked to an essence of the sacred. Against the widespread view that politics and the sacred are opposed binary categories, the hypothesis here is that the frames of reference in which quests for the sacred emerge are themselves moving and unstable. The sacred therefore should be approached as evoking two diametrically opposed movements, which constitute each other.

On the one hand, it gives an extra sense of legitimation to forms of political order that cannot be legitimised by themselves. In this sense, it transcends this order. It means the access to the wholly Other, the initiation in profound mysteries. Such mysteries are emotionally strong and extra-rational reference points. They transcend forms of social life and political order that are organised around homogeneous patterns of chronological time, material interests, or predictability. We can think here of the irrational in the experience of the divine (Otto 2004 [1917]), the fundamental nature of the sacred in religious phenomena (Eliade 1956), or the dimension of the sacred in ritual (van Gennep 1909, Hubert and Mauss 1964, Turner 1969, Douglas 2007). Modern understandings endow the sacred with a moral weight, with the 'good' or absolute ethical attributes. 'The sublime [*das Erhabene*], for instance, follows the moral law' (Kant 1974 – my translation). Immanuel Kant's idea of the limit as a boundary not to be transgressed is a central factor for the dogmatism that limits the sacred to the 'good' or to purely ethical attributes (*sittliches Prädikat*).

Moral teachings grounded on religions of salvation or beliefs in an afterlife may direct believers towards the attainment of non-empirical and non-mundane goods. Canonised faith and the moral law, however, are merely two historical containers of sacred experience among many. According to Rudolf Otto, such readings neglect the fact that the distinctive feature of the sacred (*das Heilige*) is the surplus it contains (Otto 2004: 5–7). Purity comes into focus only if contrasted with spaces or practices that command full respect, piety, and veneration. As Nietzsche put it, Kant's 'categorical imperative smells of cruelty' (Nietzsche 1997, vol. II: 806 – my translation). The Latin *sacer* or the Greek *hieros* determined primarily only this surplus. The Greek *hieros* derives from the Indo-European base **eis-* ('to move violently, to excite'). The Latin root of 'sacred', *sacer*, has a double meaning: it signifies both something holy or consecrated and something accursed or devoted to destruction.² Otto's notion of the *numinosum* captures the essence of the sacred in the experience of mysterious presence, which is paradoxical. This mysterious experience can be *tremendum*, an experience of dread, awe, demonic

² http://bible-history.com/latin/latin_s.html.

shyness, and creature feeling (*Kreaturgefühl*) before an unconceivable power. By contrast, it also includes the majestic or *fascinosum*, deeply attractive and wonderful.

On the other hand, sacred practices have legitimating power because they address existential problems in the immanent world. The Roman notion of *homo sacer* identified the core of sovereignty in the person that cannot be sacrificed but nevertheless can be killed (Agamben 1998). Giorgio Agamben's ingenious analysis sees the use of the principle of *homo sacer* as a permanent structural feature in the hands of sovereign power. It takes the sacred to be a production of particular threshold experiences. Taking the concentration camp as the zone of where distinctions between life and death, between victims and perpetrators, disappear, the paradigm of sovereign power hinges on the bio-political principle of sacred life. Sacred life is both the highest awe-inspiring authority and the most susceptible to annihilation. In a lucid critique of Agamben's work, William Connolly advocates a return to the conventional use of the sacred as the one that is to be approached with awe (Connolly 2007: 143–4). Connolly rejects the double sense within the logic of the sacred in favour of the conventional rendering Agamben seeks to overturn. Agamben's merit is certainly to recognise the ambivalence of the sacred. Yet, he overemphasises the transhistorical structural control of sovereign power over the sacred. Agamben's use of the *homo sacer* turns a historical phenomenon into a foundational principle of politics.

Much like Durkheim's idea that the majesty of society structures the consciousness and the attitudes of individuals to match that of the collectivity, such a view underestimates the historically contingent extraordinary politics (Durkheim 1967 [1915]). Individuals are not always and everywhere subordinated to mechanical solidarity, which would be under the spell of a collectively recognised 'totem', 'society', or 'democracy'. In reality, there are numerous ways for particular persons, collective groups, or even societies to experience the sacred. Meanings of the sacred are developed, bent, or recast in an ongoing process of meaningful contingency. In his recent call for an anthropology of the contemporary, Paul Rabinow argued that beyond historical conditions, there is always a great deal of contingency and under-determination (Rabinow and Marcus 2008). As a condition of the political, this under-determination elicits lasting effects. Although political bonds may have lost any religious sense in terms of obligation to a God, energies for collective self-transcendence have remained alive. In complex political contexts, they are neither chronologically linear nor determined by their function. They emerge and are dismantled. During

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the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, political theology concerned the status of national sovereignty or questions about the separation of church and state. Ever since the French Revolution the sacred has migrated from the monarch's symbolic power to cultural practices and ethical imperatives. After two world wars and several genocides, the sacred has turned attention from cathedrals to war memorials and sites of genocide commemoration. In many ways political theology is, following Roberto Farneti, 'politics after God left, it is politics after divine politics. It is not politics without God, as God remains as a problem' (Farneti 2015: 100).

As long as the extraordinary can irrupt in the ordinary reality of political societies, the presence of the sacred can transform possibilities. While the sacred is a symptom of disenchantment and crisis, it also is the yardstick for the just measure and the limit that restore boundaries. Voids of meaning have to be kept in check by transcendental signifiers, symbols, or rituals. Paradoxically, sacrifice exerts terror but also strong fascination and a 'magic spell'. Sacrifice has the function to channel and control outbreaks of violence. Traditionally, political communities transformed passive victims into their gods, their models, and the pillars of their value systems. According to the anthropologist René Girard, the victim is the first symbolic sign ever to emerge (Girard 1977). The sacrifice of a single victim occurs through an instinctive-emotional act of collective violence. This violence develops a protective function that will become ritualised in lasting structures of meaning. A double 'transference' occurs between victim and victimisers. The victim is first identified as a source of all the evil that afflicts the community. But then, given the cathartic effects of his murder as a scapegoat, the victim comes to be venerated as the source of all the good (that is, restored social cohesion and peace) resulting from his death. Collective violence becomes the organising centre around which structures of meaning arise. The primary 'function' of the ritualisation and symbolisation of sacrifice is to keep violence outside the community. The sacred *contains* violence in the double sense of the word: it is a bloody act of murder, but it is destined not to be identified as a murder by posterity. The violence contained (present) in sacrifice is violence that is contained (limited) by sacrifice (Scubla 1999a: 138). While the religious core of sacrificing to a divinity subsides, it acquires a regulatory function for social life.

The age of victimhood in the global age is marked by the return of sacrifice (Dupuy 2005, Lefranc and Mathieu 2009, Kahn 2008, Girard 2010, Halbertal 2012, Fierke 2013, Farneti 2015). The sacrifice of innocents is outrageous. Yet, it provides communities with protection from disaster, disintegration, and violence. The life-giving and ordering