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# *Katechon* and the Problem of Order

The previous chapter explored some contemporary challenges to the constitutional order in the form of populist politics and new movements for social and environmental justice. It was argued that these challenges were symptomatic of a crisis of legitimacy of liberal democracy and the (neo)liberal economic order with which it is associated. In the context of this crisis, and in thinking about how to respond to it, the chapter also explored a more radical articulation of political theology, one that sees the possibility of redemption in the promise of justice and emancipation rather than in the authority of a sovereign state.

Our investigation throughout this book has been centered around the themes of *crisis*, *order*, and *redemption*. As we have argued, the question of political theology emerges, in all its intensity, in response to a crisis of representation—in other words, when the current political order can no longer embody or contain the social antagonisms and forces that start to agitate it from within and spill over its edges. Here the political order is confronted with its lack of stable foundations, with its indeterminacy, contingency, and the specter of its own finality. Schmitt believed that in the modern era, defined by the lack of theological coordinates, adrift in the nihilistic seas of technology, capitalist economics, bourgeois individualism, and revolutionary politics, the state would not survive in its current constitutional form. His solution to this increasingly anarchic situation was for the state to in a sense *embody* this coming anarchy as a way of restraining it or warding it off. The state would have to free itself from constitutional constraints and legal limits—in other words, declare a state of emergency as a way of reimposing order and restoring its sovereign authority. In order to preempt the Apocalypse, the sovereign

state must in a sense simulate and provoke it. It is no wonder that this particular way of reimposing order on society paved the way for the Nazi apocalypse and resulted in the total destruction of the German state. In an unstable world, Schmitt sought salvation and redemption in a theologically charged idea of sovereignty, seeing this as the only way of preventing disaster.

In our world today, no less unstable and crisis-ridden than in Schmitt's time, we are forced to return with renewed urgency to the question of redemption. But in what form? If the existing liberal constitutional order can no longer command the faith and loyalty of its citizens, if it can no longer protect them, or even protect itself, from the forces it has unleashed, should we seek to preserve it? And if so, how? How can an order that is in crisis preserve itself without at the same time hollowing itself out, that is, without violating the very principles and procedures upon which it is based? If, on the other hand, we seek salvation in a total transformation of our political and economic arrangements, what would this look like? What alternatives are on offer? In an age characterized by the collapse of the revolutionary metanarrative, where, given past experience, revolutionary eschatology is looked on with an understandable degree of suspicion, it is very unclear what this notion of total transformation would amount to and how it would be achieved. It seems evident, to us at least, that the solution to political and economic instability, not to mention ecological disaster, cannot be a new sovereign state of exception. If anything, the model of strong nation-state sovereignty that Schmitt was defending is not only unsustainable in the current globalized era, but is actually an *accelerator* of the coming crisis rather than a bulwark against it. On the other hand, while there is a real need for alternative political and legal structures, ones that transcend national borders, that rely on global cooperation and solidarity rather than geopolitical competition, there seems to be little impetus behind such measures, and the vision of a new planetary order remains just as hazy and obscure as ever.

In coming to terms with this dilemma, we will encounter two central theological figures that are opposed and yet inextricably bound together: the Apocalypse and the *katechon*. Our time, perhaps more so than any other, is haunted by the image of the Apocalypse, particularly in the era dominated by the Anthropocene and the looming threat of ecological disaster, not to mention the sense of uncertainty and finitude experienced in the COVID pandemic and other global events, such as the invasion of Ukraine and the prospect of nuclear armed conflict. The cumulative effect is to place political, social, and economic forms into fundamental question. Like those early Christian communities addressed by the Apostle Paul, whose forewarnings we will say more about, we are thrown into a state of agitation and uncertainty as we are faced with the end of the world. All political and legal authority, just like the Roman Empire in Paul's time, appears increasingly ephemeral, temporary, and finite as the end draws near. Of course, the difference in our experience today is that, unlike in Christian eschatology where the Apocalypse is the destructive event, or series of events, which at the same time precedes and *reveals* the Second Coming of Christ and thus the promise of salvation, for us there is no final horizon of redemption in ecological catastrophe. For us, living under the shadow of the Anthropocene, the end *really is* the end. But what does this mean for the messianic promise of redemption and the hope for future justice and emancipation?

The absolute finality of the end today places even more acute focus on the alternative idea of the *katechon*, the obscure and enigmatic figure from Pauline theology, as the power that delays the end of the world. However, in restraining the ascendancy of the Antichrist, the *katechon* also delays the coming of the Kingdom of Christ and the final victory over evil. The *katechon* therefore has an extremely complex and ambiguous place within Christian theology, and we will have more to say about this and about the political effects of this ambiguity later.

However, it is important to note that the *katechon* is absolutely central to Schmitt's political theology, and indeed to any understanding of political theology. If we understand political theology broadly as the translation of theological concepts into political concepts, then without some idea of a force that delays the end of the world, there is no politics as such; there is only theology. In other words, the *katechon* creates an autonomous space for politics that escapes, even if momentarily, the eschatology that otherwise inexorably proceeds toward the end, rendering all politics pointless. The *katechon* interrupts this imminent, and immanent, logic, creating a space or gap in which political activity can take place. As that which holds off the coming of the end, the *katechon* is what gives meaning to human institutions and action. In other words, political activity ceases to have a purpose if the end of the word is inevitable. Such a realization would be entirely politically disabling and would lead only to apathy and indifference. The *katechon* as a gap, an interregnum, thus creates a space for politics. It is the force behind both the desire to preserve existing institutions, as well as the desire to transform them; it gives meaning to both conservative and revolutionary forms of politics, and even to a *revolutionary conservative* politics such as Schmitt's. Indeed, as we shall see, Schmitt, following a tradition of political theology that flowed from Tertullian to Hobbes, associates the *katechon* with political sovereignty, with, first, the Christian empire in the Middle Ages, and later with the modern state. This does not mean, however, that the *katechon* always translates into state sovereignty. There may be alternative, nonsovereign political arrangements that can play the role of the *katechon*—and, indeed, these alternatives will be explored in this chapter. At the same time, the *katechon* is a fundamentally ambiguous concept, any political consideration of which brings up a number of questions. What exactly is the *katechon*: is it a person, an institution, the law itself? Indeed, can it even take a distinct political form? And who or what is the Antichrist

whose ascendency the *katechon* holds at bay; how should evil be understood in political terms today? Moreover, how exactly should we understand the relationship between the *katechon* and the Antichrist? While it might seem that these are distinct and opposed entities, as we shall see, they are intimately connected, one being immanent within the other. Finally, is the *katechon* itself on the side of good or evil? From the point of view of Paul's eschatology, this is fundamentally unclear. While, on the one hand, the *katechon* delays the reign of evil in the world, in so doing it also delays the final defeat of evil and the triumph of the good. Yet, it is this ambivalence that, we argue, makes the *katechon* a fundamental political, and politico-theological, category, one that allows for genuine political reflection and action.

## The Coming Barbarism

These days it is hard not to think about the end of the world. The "end of times" dominates our imagination. We have the looming specter of ecological catastrophe. The environmental crisis is something that will make the planet unlivable, and indeed has already made it unlivable for people, not to mention for other nonhuman species, in many parts of the world. Rapid and uncontrolled climate change, with all its consequences, fundamentally reshapes our relation to the world and to ourselves, defining its absolute limit and haunting us with the prospect of civilizational collapse. The pandemic, which has served as the harbinger and symbol of this catastrophic horizon, has confronted us with our own mortality, with our frailty and finitude as human beings. More significant, perhaps, is the sense of social death—the feeling that life will never be the same again, that what were once normal social interactions and behaviors will never return; that our world, at least as we knew it, has already ended and we are living a strange, dimly lit afterlife bereft of hope, lacking the very qualities that make life worth living. We seem

to be witnessing the disintegration of a once familiar social and political landscape as we enter onto an uncertain terrain without clear coordinates and ontological guarantees. No wonder that the prevailing experience today is one of overwhelming anxiety, coupled with a sense of powerlessness in the face of this existential threat.

Reading the book of Revelations, the divine mysteries revealed, as it is alleged, to John of Patmos, it is hard not to be struck by the contemporary resonance of his description of the Apocalypse.[1] There are scenes of devastation and destruction, with rivers and seas being poisoned, grasses and trees being burnt up, hunger, infestations of locusts, plagues of all kinds, earthquakes and hailstorms, people seeking refuge in caves. The final judgment that God visits upon the world cannot be dissociated from the idea of the natural world's final judgment over us. And yet, unlike in the biblical prophecy, there is, for us today, no possible redemption, no River of Life and Tree of Life that will heal us or miraculously repair the damage done to the planet.

The Apocalypse is a particularly powerful and resonant metaphor for some of the destructive forces and energies that—aside from climate change from which they cannot at the same time be disassociated—have been unleashed on our world. The coming barbarism[2] can be seen in many of the destructive trends immanent in the liberal capitalist global order, whose fragmentation we are currently witnessing with all the violence and instability this portends. The dynamics of neoliberal globalization have produced, on the one hand, the atomized individualism of the possessive and narcissistic consumer and, on the other, as part of the same dialectic, antagonistic and exclusionary forms of communitarianism. The telos of capitalist globalization seems to be playing itself out in the proliferation everywhere of barriers, borders, and other means of separation, from the crudest fences and walls to the most sophisticated surveillance and biometric technologies, which are designed to exclude certain people and restrict their

movement. The demos is animated by the desire for division and separation into homogeneous communities. There is a renewed demand for sovereignty, or for the fantasy image of sovereignty, as a projection of enclosed, bordered communities and national identities. However, divisions and antagonisms over identity and culture return to the very heart of our societies, which at times seem to be verging on civil war. Contemporary societies appear increasingly fragmented and polarized, split along ideological and cultural lines. The global order is deteriorating into a sort of planetary civil war, with hatreds and antagonisms cropping up everywhere, within and between nation-states. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, fueled by messianic fantasies of restoring imperial sovereignty, highlights the extreme fragility of the international order.

Liberal democracies seem to be incapable of containing these tensions and antagonisms. Indeed, one of the main antagonisms emerging here is between liberal democracy and capitalism itself. While the idea of a capitalist economy and the liberal democratic constitutional order have historically gone together, it seems evident that they are now coming apart, and that capitalism is perfectly compatible with the most authoritarian and oppressive regimes, as the example of China demonstrates. Moreover, after decades of the neoliberal deracination of public institutions and the public space, upon which any coherent understanding of democracy rests (see Brown, 2015, 2019), Western democratic societies themselves are becoming increasingly illiberal, driven by authoritarian populist forces that want to restrict the rights of minorities and migrants, as well as by governments that are only too willing to impose draconian measures and limit civil liberties in response to emergencies, as we have seen all too clearly with the pandemic.

Capitalism, as an economic system, simply has no need for liberal democratic institutions and, indeed, would rather dispense with them altogether in order to allow the unfettered reign of

the market and ever greater concentrations of wealth and power. Late modern capitalism is coming to resemble something more like feudalism, or techno-feudalism, in which the concentration of informational power in the hands of big tech coincides with an increasingly hierarchical and unequal social order. Our dependence on internet-based communication technologies and platforms, as an aspect of our technologically saturated and increasingly virtualized lives—particularly now as a result of the pandemic—gives an extraordinary degree of power to big tech companies. The way that computer algorithms and data analytics, particularly on social media, can be used to track movements; monitor interactions, interests, spending habits, internet search histories; predict behaviors; and shape preferences, even political preferences, points to a new age of authoritarian capitalism that is unhinged from any kind of democratic constraints or accountability.

The libertarian fantasies and messianic ruminations of tech entrepreneurs like Peter Thiel, founder of Palantir Technologies, whose data analytics software is used for surveillance purposes by military intelligence, national security agencies, police, hedge funds, banks, and even by public health authorities, are indicative of the general direction of late modern capitalism. Thiel believes that "creative monopolies" are good for society, and that democracy, with its quaint ideas of equality, only gets in the way of the market and technological innovation; in fact, he considers "capitalist democracy" to be an oxymoron (see Cohen, 2017). Like many other Silicon Valley messiahs, who are already "prepping" for the end of the world, building themselves state-of-the-art bunkers, Thiel speculates on the "end of times," invests money in cryogenic research as well as in projects to develop floating communities (known as "sea-steading")—independent city-states afloat on the waters of the world, like Noah's Ark after the Great Flood, outside the control of nation-states and not subject to the inconveniences of democracy.

These dystopian/utopian fantasies that our masters indulge in—including the colonization of other planets—reveal much, not only about the antidemocratic tendencies of late modern capitalism but also about the condition of nihilism characteristic of our time. The sense that the world is coming to an end is experienced in a general mood of pessimism, helplessness, and impotence. We feel unable to act when confronted with a world that appears to be spinning off its hinges and beyond any kind of human control. We witness a social order that is disintegrating before our very eyes, powerless spectators to the crises and catastrophes that seem to pile up day by day. This sense of impotence is channeled into different forms of psychic regression, from mental illness, depression, and anxiety—rates of which are increasing exponentially—to explosions of rage, hatred, and violence evident in mass shootings, terrorist outrages, racist attacks. We find it too in the sense of paranoia prevalent in conspiracy theories, particularly those that have emerged around COVID and vaccines. The general "post-truth" climate, where the symbolic order of truth, central to the liberal notion of public reason, collapses, and where reality is drowned out in a miasma of mis- and disinformation, competing perspectives, and "alternative facts," is an aspect of this nihilism. There is a widespread disdain for truth, a willingness to believe in whatever narrative best accords with one's prejudices or brings one the most satisfaction or enjoyment. Willful ignorance and stupidity[3] seem to reign everywhere. Nihilism also fuels a newfound religious intensity, seen in the return of religious fundamentalism or in new forms of religious belief and identification, akin to mass psychosis. Above all, the nihilism of our times is expressed in a callous indifference and the lack of care for the world, a lack of concern for the suffering of others within and beyond the borders of our communities or for the natural environment. Indeed, there is a desire among some to hasten the coming catastrophe, to intensify the destructive drives of capitalism, to extract and consume the very last

drop of the earth's resources. Caught between paralyzing impotence and frenzied destruction, either believing in nothing or believing in everything, or, for the most part, simply absorbed in consumerist pleasures, we are like Nietzsche's last men of whom Zarathustra despaired.

We see signs of the Apocalypse all around us today: boatloads of refugees drowning in the Mediterranean or languishing in migrant camps; spiraling rates of contagion and death from COVID; geopolitical tensions, now over the supply of vaccines; populist demagogues stoking the fires of enmity and division; famines and humanitarian disasters; armed conflicts and civil unrest around the world; violent political repression; oceans littered with plastic and disposable masks; and the daily sounding of the death knell for the natural environment.

## The Power That Restrains

It is in this context of the "end of times" that we encounter the figure of the *katechon*. The concept, which has a marginal and obscure place in Christian theology, first appears in Paul's address to the early Christian congregations in 2 Thessalonians:

> Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming (*parousia*) of our Lord Jesus Christ, and *by* our gathering together unto him, that ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand. Let no man deceive you by any means: for *that day shall not come* , except there come a falling away (*apostasia*) first, and that man of sin (*anomia*) be revealed, the son of perdition (*apoleia*); who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he (*ho antikeimenos*) as God sitteth in the temple of God (*eis ton naon*), shewing himself that he is God. Remember ye not, that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things? And now ye know what withholdeth (*to katechon*) that he might be revealed in his time. For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth (*ho katechon*) *will let* , until he be taken out of the way (*ek mesou*

> *geneta*). And then shall that Wicked (*Anomos*) be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming (*parousia*): *even him* (*Anomos*), whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, and with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: that they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness (*adikia*). (Paul Second Letter to the Thessalonians 2: 1-12, cited in Cacciari 2018, p. 119-120).

Paul is seeking to calm the religious enthusiasm of his fellow believers for the end of the world and the promised Second Coming of Christ. He says that the Day of the Lord would be preceded by the Antichrist, "the man of lawlessness," the "son of perdition" who will bring about a state of anomie. However, this in turn will be preceded by a mysterious power that withholds or delays the coming of the Antichrist until his proper moment is revealed. In other words, there is a divinely ordained sequence of events and things must be allowed to take their course. The *katechon*, as we have already remarked, has an enigmatic place in this eschatology. It is not clear what exactly the *katechon* is: is it an abstract force, "*that which* withholds" (τὸ κατέχον), or is it a person, "*the one who* withholds" (ὁ κατέχων)? Paul seems to invoke both meanings. Furthermore, who or what exactly is the Antichrist (*antikhristos*) that the *katechon* withholds? In the Christian theological tradition, the Antichrist is the "one who denies Christ" and is seen as a false prophet, or series of false prophets, who preach misleading doctrines, who seek to deceive the followers of Christ, and to set themselves up as the Messiah. In the history of the church, the Antichrist has been associated with various Roman emperors, heretics, and later on, after the Protestant Reformation, even with the pope himself. In contemporary evangelical Christian narratives, and in various conspiracy theories, the Antichrist is depicted as one who seeks to

undermine Christian beliefs through the promotion of secular values and international institutions. The Antichrist is one who would establish a new order of unbelief (apostasy) and lawlessness (anomie), and would reign until such time as he would be revealed by Christ and removed by his breath, by the "Spirit of his mouth." The place of the *katechon* within this narrative is therefore highly ambiguous: on the one hand, its intervention arrests or delays the reign of evil and lawlessness; but on the other hand, it also delays the Coming of the Christ and the final victory of good over evil. Furthermore, Paul says that the "mystery of lawlessness is already operating." So how can it be that the *katechon* stops or delays what is already happening? Or is Paul here simply referring to the imminence of lawlessness, something that we see signs of but is not yet fully in effect? This would intimate a relationship of immanence—that the *katechon* and the Antichrist are opposed elements within the same phenomenon (see also Cacciari, 2018).

It is, however, the political, or politico-theological, implications of the *katechon* that we are concerned with here. There are two main interpretations to be considered. First, the *katechon* is crucial to Schmitt's understanding of political theology. Schmitt says in his writings from 1947, "I believe in the *katechon*: it is for me the only possibility as a Christian to understand history and find it meaningful. We have to be able to name the *katechon* for every epoch in the last 1948 years. The place has never been unoccupied, otherwise we would not be present anymore. . . . There are temporary, transient, splinter-like fragmentary bearers for this role" (cited in Szendy, 2016). Why was this obscure figure from Pauline theology so important for Schmitt? Following a line of thinking that extended from early theologians like Tertullian, who associated the *katechon* with the Roman Empire, to the theorist of the modern state, Hobbes, Schmitt identified the *katechon* with political sovereignty. The *katechon* is a placeholder that was

occupied at various times by different political institutions, whether the Roman Empire, or the Christian empire of the Middle Ages, or the modern sovereign state. As a form of institutionalized authority, it not only delays the coming state of lawlessness and anarchy but actually gives meaning to history. Without the idea of something that defers the end of the world, history would simply have no meaning; we would live in empty time, waiting for the end, like those early Christians who are the subject of Paul's exhortation. The *katechon* interrupts this empty time, inserting within it a space for human activity, for politics. In *The* Nomos *of the Earth*, where the concept receives the most extensive treatment, Schmitt argues that the Christian empire of the Middle Ages played the historical role of the *katechon*. The Christian empire, even though it was not eternal and had an idea of its own end,[4] nevertheless fulfilled the role of historical placeholder, providing Europe with some form of identity and structure, bringing together, within the idea of a Christian republic, *imperium* (political authority) and *sacerdotium* (spiritual authority). Even though the Christian empire was not centralized—in fact, Schmitt describes its structure as "anarchic"—the *katechon* served as a unifying point of orientation and order for Europe, giving it meaning and substance. He says:

> The empire of the Christian Middle Ages lasted only as long as the idea of the katechon was alive. I do not believe that any historical concept other than katechon would have been possible for the original Christian faith. The belief that a restrainer holds back the end of the world provides the only bridge between the notion of an eschatological paralysis of all human events and a tremendous historical monolith like that of the Christian empire of the Germanic kings. (2006, pp. 59–60)

Here Schmitt once again reaffirms the significance of the *katechon* for his political theology: the intervention of the *katechon* interrupts the empty time of eschatology, in which all political life is

otherwise paralyzed, and allows politics to take place. It thus provides a bridge between theology and politics, allowing theological concepts and ideas to take a political shape. This was, of course, something that Erik Peterson argued was impossible from the point of view of Christian doctrine. However, from Schmitt's perspective, political theology is made possible via this, albeit rather obscure, theological figure.

Thinking about the *katechon* in this way allows us to make better sense of the various figures of political order and legitimacy that Schmitt has deployed in his political theology, whether the aforementioned Christian empire, or the Roman Catholic Church itself, or the modern sovereign state defined through the state of exception. All these institutions had the function of uniting society around a representative image, providing it with a stabilizing, anchoring point, and preventing the coming nihilism and anomie, the reign of the Antichrist that Schmitt saw in the different guises of liberalism, technology, atheism, and revolutionary anarchism. The restraining of these forces was much more important, for Schmitt, than the fulfillment of Christian eschatology—a point made by Jacob Taubes: "[Schmitt] prays for the preservation of the state, since if, God forbid, it doesn't remain, chaos breaks loose, or even worse, the Kingdom of God!" (2003, pp. 69–70). In Schmitt's thinking, the *katechon* is always a form of sovereignty that conserves the political order.

Is there another way to interpret the *katechon*? In Agamben's alternative reading of Paul, he essentially downplays the significance and value of this concept: "Yet, the fact remains that despite its obscurity, this Pauline passage does not harbor any positive valuation of *katechōn*. To the contrary, it is what must be held back in order that the 'mystery of anomia' be revealed fully" (2005b, pp. 110). In other words, because the *katechon* is that which delays the revelation of the mystery of lawlessness, and thus ultimately delays the Parousia of Christ, it is precisely the

*katechon* that must be held at bay. The *katechon* is not a positive force that wards off evil, but is part of the very structure of evil. As Paul says, the mystery of lawlessness is already at work in the world—so, logically speaking, the *katechon* must be part of this phenomenon. Or, on Agamben's account, it is the force behind which the principle of lawlessness or anomia hides. The *katechon* is therefore part of the same structure as the lawlessness it holds back:

> It is therefore possible to conceive of *katechon* and *anomos* not as two separate figures . . . but as one single power before and after the final unveiling. Profane power—albeit of the Roman Empire or any other power—is the semblance that covers up the substantial lawlessness [*anomia*] of messianic time. In solving the "mystery," semblance is cast out, and power assumes the figure of the *anomos*, of that which is the absolute outlaw. . . . This is how the messianic is fulfilled in the clash between the two *parousiai*: between that of the *anomos*, who is marked by the working of Satan in every power [*potenza*], and that of the Messiah, who will render energeia inoperative in it. (2005b, p. 111)

Messianic time, in Agamben's reading, is what renders all law inoperative. It produces a "state of exception," whose mystery must be revealed in order for the authority of the law to be brought to its end. The law is a machine that produces law and lawlessness as the two opposed sides of itself, and it is this machine whose workings are brought to a halt in this eschatology. Here there is an interpretation of the messianic fulfillment that closely parallels Walter Benjamin's notion of "divine violence"—the force that brings to an end to the continual oscillation between lawmaking and law-preserving violence, between constituting and constituted power, finally redeeming humanity, expiating guilt, and allowing us to live in the law's absence (see Benjamin, 1986).[5]

As with Benjamin's notion of divine violence, there is a clear anarchistic orientation in Agamben's reading of Paul's messianism, an orientation that we also find in Taubes's revolutionary interpretation of Paul (see 2003). For all these thinkers, the messianic moment coincides with the ending of legal sovereignty and the abolition of state power (Benjamin, 1986, p. 252). This is why, according to Agamben's reading, which is directly opposed to Schmitt's, the *katechon* is not a positive force but an institution of sovereignty that simply gets in the way of "the coming anarchy." Yet here, anarchy—or lawlessness—has two dimensions or sides, "bad" and "good": the *anarchy of power* and the *anarchy beyond power*.[6] There is a real ambiguity here. For Agamben, it is almost as if the secret of the anarchy of power—that is the way the structures of global economic and political power appear as increasingly directionless, unhinged, and chaotic, that the law is in effect but is "without significance" (see 1998)—must be revealed before another and more redemptive kind of anarchy can appear. However, this is little more than a vague allusion. Agamben never really expands on this more positive understanding of anarchy, and certainly there is little engagement in his writings with the anarchist political tradition or with anarchist proposals for a stateless society.

While we are sympathetic to Agamben's anarchistic, or anarcho-messianic, reading of Paul's eschatology, his interpretation of anarchy gives rise to a number of problems and ambiguities. As Massimo Cacciari argues, anarchy should not be conflated with anomie—that is, with the state of lawlessness mentioned by Paul. As Cacciari points out, the Antichrist is not an anarchist but an apostate, and his reign imposes a new kind of order, one in which lawlessness and instability coincide with a form of power, with a new nomos: "*Anomie* is a new order, a new *nomos*, that of the Antikeimenos. It is a 'society' founded upon his triumph, lasting throughout

the end-time" (2018, p. 70). Moreover, under this reign, the last man, the "free" individual, in pursuing his sovereign self-interest, is at the same time caught

> solely in his own net, caught in the power of the Antikeimenos, incapable of lifting himself out of it. His epoch—which he claims will complete not only history but also the very species "man"—is that of the net in its precise metaphysical difference from the sign of the cross, in its radical "antichristicity." The former radiates out in a wholly horizontal manner and its "project" consists in annulling—in the *hic et nunc* of global space—the very meaning of eschatological-messianic time. . . . The last man has been "secured" in the net where every relation seems calculable and where what cannot be reduced to calculation is simply no-thing. (p. 73)

This seems to describe the condition of life under contemporary neoliberalism, where individual freedom is inscribed within a market rationality that governs life, that calculates and monitors behavior, the Foucauldian "conduct of conduct" (see 2008). The last man, under this condition, lives in a flattened-out space absent of meaning, concerned only with preserving his own security and consumer comforts. In other words, the reign of the Antichrist, which coincides with the neoliberal order, is also a condition of nihilism and the denial of eschatological-messianic time.

However, as we have argued, this smooth global space is today continually disrupted by new antagonisms that it has engendered but can no longer contain. According to Cacciari, all political orders, insofar as they have a catechontic function, are caught up in a tension between the need to stabilize themselves, to provide security, and to constantly transform themselves and expand beyond their own borders. The drive to stabilize and consolidate power unleashes forces of destabilization that eventually turn back on the political order itself and destroy it. Such has been the fate of every empire in history, and such is the fate, it would seem, of the current liberal

"empire." As a form of legitimating authority, the liberal order seeks to "represent" the age, to contain and hold together the tensions that constantly threaten to disrupt it. However, it is becoming clear that this representative function is no longer effective, and that the liberal order is now subject to antagonisms that it can no longer manage. This is why, for Cacciari, the *katechon*, in its administrative-securitizing function, is not only impotent before the advancing anomie but in a sense is complicit with it. To defer the coming disorder, it has to embody it—as Schmitt made quite explicit in his notion of the state of exception, which he saw as the hidden truth of the constitutional order. Yet, in doing so, political orders end up destroying themselves in an autoimmune fashion. Therefore, "the katechon cannot fail to participate in the most intimate fashion with the principle it strives to withhold and delay, if not bring to a halt. It is impossible not to retain what you seek to contain. Every catechontic power must constitute itself within the dimension, even the cosmic dimension, of the principle of anomie that is destined to triumph" (Cacciari, 2018, p. 51). If it is the case, then, that the *katechon* is indeed complicit with the very forces of anomie, with the reign of lawlessness that it claims to hold at bay, then why invest any importance or value in it at all? Is Agamben right to think that the *katechon* should only be seen as something to be overcome rather than something to be preserved? Why not simply hasten the coming of the end, wherein also lies our redemption? The trouble with this messianic line of thinking where, in a sense, the worse it gets the better it gets, is that we cannot quite be sure of any promise of redemption. As we have suggested, the age of the Anthropocene places in doubt all messianic thinking. The end is simply unthinkable; it has an absolute finality, with little hope of redemption, with no promise of the Second Coming. In other words, in the age dominated by ecological crisis, where things can *always* get worse, we cannot afford to simply let events take their course, let alone to hasten the coming catastrophe in the hope of overcoming it according to

some sort of vague promise of salvation. What this future salvation could mean in concrete political terms is very unclear, and, given the stakes involved, too risky to even contemplate. Rather, any possibility of salvation means acting *now*, in the present moment, and putting off, withholding, insofar as it is possible, the political and economic drives and forces that are otherwise impelling us toward destruction. The ability to act in the present moment, the capacity to experiment with new forms of politics, develop new conceptions of community, create a new kind of "order" means reinventing the *katechon*.

## Care for the World

The *katechon*, we suggest, does not always have to be thought in the form of political sovereignty or according to the logic of the "lesser evil." There are alternatives to Schmitt's conservative interpretation of the *katechon*, as the antiutopian force that defends the political order and that is identified with the decision-making authority of the sovereign state (see Virno, 2008). Indeed, today, in the context of heightened geopolitical competition and tension between nation-states, driven by populist and authoritarian political forces, it would seem that sovereignty itself, rather than acting as a *katechon*, is more like an *accelerator* of the coming crisis. Contrary to Schmitt, state sovereignty appears more and more as a destabilizing force in our world today. This does not mean, on the other hand, that we are confined to the preservation of the current form of the liberal constitutional order. Rather, our aim should be to develop an alternative political project, or series of projects, oriented around an ethics of care and conservation—care for the world that exists and for those who live within it, and conservation of the natural environment threatened with serious depletion. In other words, the *katechon* today might be

rethought as a politics of planetary care, which is also a recognition of our entanglement with the world and our broader ethical commitments and responsibilities toward others.

Elena Pulcini has argued for a new ethics of care and solidarity that extends beyond national borders. Capitalist globalization, she contends, because it means the loss of boundaries and markers of certainty and identity, gives rise to the conflicting tendencies of hyper-individualism and narcissistic consumerism, on the one hand, and closed and identitarian forms of communitarianism, on the other. The latter emerges as a regressive reaction to the former, but it also reflects a genuine need and desire for community in our atomized global world, as a form of protection from our exposure to uncertainty and insecurity. The predominant passion today is *fear*, fear of the outside world, a fear that often translates into hostility toward the other, the desire for closed, bordered nation-states, and the scapegoating of minorities and immigrants. The resurgence of national populism that we have explored in the previous chapter can be understood entirely from this perspective: the fear of a globalized and uncertain world is channeled into resentment toward minorities, who are seen to pose a risk to national identity, as well as into acting out an aggressive form of sovereignty. However, in Pulcini's psychological account of ethics, which draws on the thought of Günther Anders, fear can also be a productive emotion that can be transformed from fear *of* the world to fear *for* the world. Fear not only shakes us out of our individualistic consumerist slumber but can also remind us of our common vulnerability. Fear brings to the forefront the question of our own survival, forcing upon us moral and political tasks that we would otherwise rather ignore. In contrast to messianic eschatology, which is filled with hope and enthusiasm for future redemption and salvation, Pulcini sees fear as a more powerful motivator for human action (2013, p. 144). However, this sentiment of fear needs to be converted into a sense of ethical responsibility through the idea of contamination, or, as we

would say, *entanglement*. Here the awareness of the extent to which we are proximate to others and to which our fate is inevitably bound up with others—an awareness that otherwise provokes fear and hostility—is transformed into a positive value, one that results in a greater recognition of, and hospitality toward, difference (p. 153). It is important to point out that this recognition of difference is not the same as "identity politics"—which is as much, if not more, a disposition of the political right as the left—but, on the contrary, something that troubles and disturbs the very boundaries of identity. As Pulcini says: "To recognize difference it is necessary first of all to put one's own identity at stake so as to avert all danger of absolutization" (p. 154).

The heightened awareness of our ecological entanglement, our dependence upon, and our vulnerability to, natural ecosystems, can act as an impulse for a greater sense of environmental responsibility. Indeed, as Hans Jonas argues, the future survivability of humanity is so obviously bound up with the future survivability of nature that self-interest alone imposes upon us a sense of responsibility toward the natural world:

> Care for the future of mankind is the overruling duty of collective human action in the age of a technical civilization that has become "almighty," if not in its productive then at least in its destructive potential. This care must obviously include care for the future of all nature on this planet as a necessary condition of man's own. . . . There is no need, however, to debate the relative claims of nature and man when it comes to the survival of either, for in this ultimate issue their causes converge from the human angle itself. Since, in fact, the two cannot be separated without making a caricature of the human likeness—since, rather, in the matter of preservation or destruction the interest of man coincides, beyond all material needs, with that of life as his worldly home in the most sublime sense of the word—we can subsume both duties as one under the heading "responsibility toward man" without falling into a narrow anthropocentric view. (1984, p. 136)

Fear, and even self-interest, can thus become the basis for care, and care can become the basis for a greater ethical responsibility toward the other and a new vision for global social justice. Pulcini considers the possible transformation of the egotistic individual, otherwise absorbed by consumerist pleasures and fearful of the other, to an individual "capable of taking care of the world since he is aware of the world's fragility and the nexus that today indissolubly links every single being to the destiny of humankind" (pp. 163–164). Part of the task of taking care of the world is being able to think the world in common, as a common ethical and political project, something that the dynamics of globalization have made possible; in other words, to imagine a new *world form* (see also Nancy, 2007). Caring for the world means preserving it against destructive forces that globalization has unleashed. As Pulcini says, "Care of the world therefore means, first of all, preservation of the world, protecting humankind against the specter of self-destruction and defending life" (p. 200). In other words, the politics and ethics of world care has, in our terms, a catechontic function—it preserves what is worthy of preservation, holding at bay the forces of nihilism and destruction. However, as Pulcini points out—and here we would agree—this is not a conservative political gesture but, rather, something emancipatory: "A far cry from having the static and anti-progressist sense of maintaining the status quo, here 'preservation' assumes the disruptive and emancipatory meaning of a preliminary moral task: to protect something that, in the absence of our attention and our care, we risk inevitably exposing to loss, orphaning us of the only dwelling place that we have been allowed to know thus far" (p. 200). Rather than simply maintaining the status quo, the politico-ethical—we could also say *politico-theological*—project invoked here is one of *conscious* and *active* care. It is not simply about preserving what currently exists, but creating a new world: "Entrusted to the individual

creator of meaning, care of the world in itself sums up the moment of preservation and the moment of creation" (p. 207).

Pulcini's ethics of care of the world is defined not so much by abstract, rationalistic, and contractualist theories of justice and rights—those associated with Kant and Rawls for instance—but rather by an affective and emotional commitment to the well-being of others. Nor is it simply about sentiments like compassion and pity, which can be patronizing and disempowering to those who suffer, but, rather, an active and meticulous attention to the other. Care is associated with ideas of generosity, love, solidarity, through which the social bond is enhanced and intensified. As such, care goes beyond justice that, while important, tends to be confined to questions of the distribution of resources and the balancing of entitlements. While calculations of this sort are no doubt essential for addressing existing global inequalities, what separates justice from care, according to Pulcini, is that care also involves a commitment to the future—to future generations and to the future of the planet. Central to care, moreover, is a kind of excess or plenitude embodied in the idea of the gift and the gesture of giving, which transcends legalistic, egalitarian models of justice (p. 252).

There is certainly much of value in Pulcini's ethics of care. The awareness of our entanglement with the fate of others, and particularly with the natural environment, must surely supplement any vision of global social justice, as must the emotions of love, generosity, and solidarity that arise from this sense of common vulnerability. No doubt one of the limitations with liberal contractualist models of justice is their inability to adequately accommodate these affects. Indeed, these passions and affects are more easily and meaningfully expressed within the language of theology rather than within the liberal idea of public reason. As we saw from previous chapters, theological interpretations of justice have been based on the recognition of

common suffering and vulnerability; for instance, Metz's notion of *memoria passionis*. Moreover, ecopolitical theological approaches such as Keller's and Moltmann's incorporate a notion of planetary and ecological entanglement into a deeper notion of social justice. Theology, to the extent that it is concerned with what exceeds secular political experience and discourse, can provide us with an alternative language in which to express the emotional commitments that Pulcini takes as central.

## Cosmopolitical Theology

If the idea of planetary care is to become the ethical orientation for a new kind of politics—and indeed Pulcini insists on the public, that is to say, *political* dimension of care—we cannot imagine anything more different to Schmitt's sovereign-centric model. Sentiments such as care, love, solidarity are entirely alien not only to Schmitt's juridical way of thinking but also to his vision of the world of bordered national communities defined through relations of enmity, in which the only legitimate passion is obedience to the sovereign state. The idea of care and solidarity across borders, the recognition of shared responsibility for a world in common, is utterly inimical to Schmitt, who remained suspicious of even the thinnest notion of internationalism and global humanitarian ethics. Of course, his critique is pitched against the *liberal* international order, which, as we would agree, is a deeply flawed structure. However, as we have argued, the alternative cannot be to return to a geopolitical order defined by competing and antagonistic sovereign states. Rather, the crisis of representation experienced by the existing liberal order, which brings unparalleled dangers, also presents us with an opportunity to rethink globalization, to transform it in more positive ways through a reflection on our shared commitments to human and ecological survival. This would involve experimentation with new

international and transnational legal institutions, new articulations of human and ecological rights, a just distribution of the world's resources, including medical resources, and so on. While such proposals and innovations seem detached and utopian now, they will become inevitable as the world contends with increasingly pressing global problems of climate change or, indeed, future pandemics.

The idea of caring for the world, for the welfare of others, for future generations, and for the natural environment beyond the borders of one's national community necessarily evokes a cosmopolitan ethical and political horizon. But of what kind? How should we think of cosmopolitanism today, in an era dominated by geopolitical competition and heightened antagonisms between communities, when the very notion of globalization has fallen into disrepute? How may we revisit the idea of cosmopolitanism—the vision of a global human community and global citizenship—without falling into the trap that Schmitt warned us about when he said, modifying the phrase of the anarchist Proudhon, "Whoever invokes humanity wants to cheat"? Schmitt's point was that not only was the idea of a liberal international order defined by universal humanitarian ethics untenable, but that it actually served as an ideological guise for the projection of particular geopolitical and strategic interests. In other words, global humanitarianism was often a cover for new forms of imperialism. Yet, what characterizes the current situation is the absence of any kind of imperial project or ambition, and perhaps this void in the global order of power also presents an opportunity for rethinking the cosmopolitan horizon and transforming it in a more radical and emancipatory direction.

Within the Christian tradition, as within other theological traditions, there is a cosmopolitan dimension. The possibility of salvation and redemption is, at least in theory, open to all, regardless of one's membership of a national community. The church is a universal

community of believers, rather than one confined to a narrow ethnic or national identity. Indeed, Paul proposed a form of community of believers that was simply indifferent to identity altogether: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Jesus Christ."[7] In Augustine's two cities doctrine, which was influenced by the ancient Stoic tradition of cosmopolitanism, the City of God was separated from the worldly political affairs of the City of Men and reserved for sincere believers defined by their love of God rather than by membership or affiliation with any kind of particular political community.[8] This Stoic-Christian cosmopolitan horizon found its way into humanist and natural law traditions—in the case of Aquinas, Erasmus, and Grotius—and later into the Enlightenment Kantian vision of an international order of law and individual rights, as well as shaping modern conceptions of universal human rights (see Maritain, 1944).

Today, in an era defined by religious conflict, in which religious identification often maps onto a narrower ethnocultural communitarianism, the Stoic-Christian horizon of a universal community is irrecuperable. At the same time, this post-secular condition brings with it not only new divisions and antagonisms but also the possibility of new forms of identification and solidarity that transcend national borders. Étienne Balibar uses the term "cosmopolitics" to characterize a global terrain marked by competing cosmopolitanisms; even religious or theological conflict becomes *cosmopolitical* conflict insofar as it takes places on a universal, or potentially universal, horizon. Thus, for Balibar: "Contemporary cosmopolitics is a particularly ambiguous form of politics; it consists exclusively of conflicts between universalities without ready-made solutions. It does not prefigure the realization of a philosophical 'cosmopolitanism,' but neither does it purely and simply do away with the possibility of taking it as a point of reference. It would be more accurate to say that cosmopolitics clears the field for competition

between alternative cosmopolitanisms" (2018, p. 48). If the global terrain is one on which all major conflicts over identity must be understood, then some sort of cosmopolitan dimension is inevitable. The cosmopolitical horizon, in this sense, is not only a condition of conflict but also the condition of its resolution; it is not merely the possibility of global antagonism but also the possibility of cross-border solidarity and cooperation. We take cosmopolitics to refer to the ambiguous political dimension of globalization itself, which gives rise not only to new divisions but also to new transnational and emancipatory political organizations and institutional innovations, as well as affiliations and alliances that transcend national borders (see also Ingram, 2013). The cosmopolitical horizon combines thought and action—the acknowledgment of responsibility as the counterpart of an ethical imperative.

The cosmopolitical combination of thought and action entails that the ethical imperative is neither pure duty nor a preconceived political project. It is oriented by a number of propositions that express a provisional knowledge of transformation. *First*, it is not limited to constitutional design, or to the construction of new kinds of political and legal institutions. While these are essential, cosmopolitics also works on a more horizontal level of social movements that are transnational in character, and that attempt to build cross-border affinities and alliances as they contest different forms of inequality, violence, and domination. Over the decades we have seen many examples of these, from the anti-neoliberal alter-globalization movements of the 2000s and various global counter-summits such as Porto Alegre in Brazil to more recent movements for economic, environmental, and social justice. *Second*, cosmopolitics involves what Hauke Brunkhorst calls a globalization of democratic solidarity (see 2005). Highly pluralized, differentiated global societies have created the need for forms of solidarity no longer rooted in community identity but rather in democratic public legitimation, constitutionality, and

human rights. In other words, what is required to deal with inclusion problems and inequalities generated by globalization—which are at the same time the source of its lack of legitimacy—is more than international law and legal institutions, but forms of egalitarian democratic solidarity that transcend national boundaries—a new kind of global civic republicanism (see also Bohman, 2001) and even what we might call "green republicanism" (see Fremaux, 2019). *Third*, cosmopolitics can be seen in struggles over human rights, and in attempts to expand the language and scope of human rights to include those hitherto excluded, even and especially those who, as Arendt put it with regard to stateless people, lack the right to have rights. Here we can also refer to the extension of rights to the natural environment and to nonhuman species. As we have argued, political, social, and economic rights are, in the Anthropocene era, meaningless without an accompanying conception of ecological rights. Cosmopolitics involves, therefore, not only the expansion of rights recognition across national boundaries but also the possible expansion of rights discourse beyond the conceptual boundaries of the human itself to other beings and life-forms who would also have to be recognized as members of the cosmopolis, given that our survival and well-being is intrinsically bound up with theirs.[9]

## Conclusion

Indeed, cosmopolitics embodies an affective ethics and politics of *entanglement*. This is a key theme we have emphasized throughout the book. The idea that our interests are closely bound up with the interests of others, and that our survival depends on the fate of the natural ecosystems in which we are embedded, must be crucial to any cosmopolitan ethos that calls upon modes of identification beyond the atomized individual or a particular community. *Beyond* and *after* Schmitt's sovereign-centric political theology, defined by borders and boundaries, friends and

enemies, cosmopolitical theology defines a different ethical, political, and, indeed, spiritual horizon of planetary entanglement.

The different horizon reconfigures the relationship between the theological and the political. It maintains the possibility of a conjunction beyond that determined by Schmittian parameters. In our alternative rendering of political theology, what is brought into connection here is not the church and the state, nor the theological origin of the conceptual categories of a theory of the state, nor the final "stasiology" of *Political Theology II*. Instead, we have sought an interpretation of the theological and its passage to the political, which has at the same time relinquished the Schmittian restoration of political authority. In other words, our investigation of the relationship between theological and political categories has identified a different understanding of the political, one based on the secular coexistence of justice and care.

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[1] Catherine Keller has recently drawn on the contemporary parallels between the book of Revelations and the contemporary climate Apocalypse (see 2021).

[2] A reference to the title of Isabelle Stengers's book *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism* (see 2015).

[3] Bernard Stiegler associates the contemporary condition of stupidity with the stupefying effects of digital technologies on the individual, leading a reduction of the human condition: "And such torpor becomes, in our time, a stupor—and our stupefaction in the face of the state of shock provoked by digital technology leads not only to functional stupidity, but to a catastrophic and disastrous . . . destruction of noesis itself by automatic proletarianization" (2020, p. 58).

[4] Julia Hell (2009) argues that the *katechon* in Schmitt functions as a way of thinking about the duration of empires, their rise and fall, whether the Roman Empire, the German

Christian empire, and even the Third Reich, thus forming part of the European imperial imaginary.

[5] Or rather, as James Martel argues, it leads to a nonfetishistic, "anarchist" approach to law (see 2014).

[6] Agamben says (2019, pp. 66–67): "Against the anarchy of power, I do not intend to invoke a return to a solid foundation in being: even if we ever possessed such a foundation, we have certainly lost it or have forgotten how to access it. I believe, however, that a clear comprehension of the profound anarchy of the societies in which we live is the only correct way to pose the problem of power and, at the same time, that of true anarchy. Anarchy is what becomes possible only when we grasp the anarchy of power. Construction and destruction here coincide without remainder."

[7] Paul's radical universalism is also commented on by Alain Badiou, who interprets it as a transversal of differences and particularisms, through the experience of love and truth, into a new kind of spiritual communion (see 2003).

[8] It is telling that Schmitt criticizes Erik Peterson's use of Augustine's two cities doctrine to reject the idea of political theology (see Schmitt, 2008b).

[9] Martha Nussbaum has argued for the inclusion of nonhuman animals within a cosmopolitan ethics and politics: "Typically the [cosmopolitan] tradition grounds our duties in the worth and dignity of moral/rational agency. This is not even a very good approach for the human kind, since it excludes humans with severe cognitive disabilities, who are certainly our fellow citizens and ought to be viewed as equal in worth. And it certainly excludes non-human animals. . . . We need an international politics that is truly cosmopolitan, and such a politics, I

argue, must be grounded in the worth and dignity of sentient bodies, not that of reason alone" (2019, pp. 16–17).