

The Review of Politics 86 (2024), 24–46.

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doi:10.1017/S0034670523000529

# Juan Donoso Cortés and Political Theology

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**Abstract:** The article offers a reconstruction of Donoso’s idea of political theology by analyzing his main work, the 1851 *Essay on Catholicism, Socialism, and Liberalism*. Commentators have often confined the role of Donoso to a footnote in the literature on Carl Schmitt. To better appreciate his original thought, this article analyzes his account of the secularization of theological ideas. Donoso understands modern politics as a confrontation between the philosophies of socialism, liberalism, and Catholicism, which diverge on questions about the nature of man, of evil, and of society. Modern worldviews are thus read through simplified Catholic dogma. Donoso’s vision of politics as secularized theology develops in dialogue with Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. The Donoso-Proudhon-Schmitt rapport allows a consideration of political theology in terms of metaphor and literary device. Within this larger story, Donoso represents the moment when a traditionalist figure of thought slowly detaches itself from its historical foundations.

## Introduction

The political usage of religious ideas and practices is routinely referred to as “political theology.”<sup>1</sup> The term hypothesizes a theological structure underlying modern politics, or, more generally, a claim about the true historical

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I am grateful for comments from Ruth Abbey and three anonymous reviewers, from Martin Beckstein, Felix Petersen, and Michael Saman, and the colloquium of the Forschungskolleg Humanwissenschaften.

<sup>1</sup>See the theme issue *Telos*, no. 194, “Political Theology Today” (Spring 2021); Faisal Devji, “The State of Political Theology,” *Political Theology* 20, no. 7 (2019): 547–55.

origins of the modern age.<sup>2</sup> For many political philosophers and intellectual historians, it signifies a framework set by Carl Schmitt's 1922 *Political Theory*, comprising four essays that blend the history of ideas with a critique of its time and a normative political theory. Its central claim is that "all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts."<sup>3</sup> Schmitt likely borrowed the term from a polemic of Mikhail Bakunin against Giuseppe Mazzini, but the substance reaches back to an older division of theologies found in Augustine, Tertullian, and Varro.<sup>4</sup> Varro is not the inventor, but the principal interpreter of a threefold Roman idea of the gods, which can take the form of a natural theology (that of philosophers), mythical theology (that of poets), and civil theology (that of legislators).<sup>5</sup> Schmitt likely tapped into this ancient division in order to interpret more recent times.<sup>6</sup>

In its capacity as a history of ideas and in its general antimodern stance, his *Political Theory* heavily draws on Catholic political thought. Schmitt cites German conservatives like F. W. J. Schlegel and Adam Müller as instances of a purely theoretical attitude towards the world, defenseless against Enlightenment ideals. In this picture, an impotent romantic reaction is contrasted with the firm reactionary polemics of Joseph de Maistre, L. G. A. de Bonald and Juan Donoso Cortés. Maistre and Bonald represent the ultraconservative Catholic reaction to 1789, while Donoso takes his cues from the European upheavals of 1848.<sup>7</sup> Hence, in the 1920s, Schmitt models himself as the next in a line of counterrevolutionary thinkers.<sup>8</sup> Maistre has been declared the true master of the reactionary

<sup>2</sup>See Hans Blumenberg, "Secularization: Critique of a Category of Historical Wrong," in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), 3–123.

<sup>3</sup>Carl Schmitt, *Political Theory: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 36.

<sup>4</sup>Mikhail Bakunin, "The Political Theology of Mazzini and the International" (1871), in *Selected Writings*, ed. Arthur Lehning (London: Cape, 1973); see Jean-François Kervégan, "Carl Schmitt," *Revue française d'histoire des idées politiques* 40, no. 2 (2014): 313–24.

<sup>5</sup>The division can be traced back to Greek Stoicism. Pierre Boyancé, "Sur la théologie de Varron," *Études sur la religion romaine* (Rome: École française de Rome, 1972): 254.

<sup>6</sup>Herrero sees Spinoza and Hobbes at the root of Schmitt's formula, which she describes as "magic." I would argue that any "magic" is due to simplicity and really the result of a linguistic maneuver: Schmitt's juridical form deliberately obscures the manifold meanings of philosophical concepts. Montserrat Herrero, "Carl Schmitt's Political Theology: The Magic of a Phrase," in *Political Theory in Medieval and Early-Modern Europe*, ed. Montserrat Herrero, Jaume Aurell, and Angela C. Miceli Stout (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017), 23–41.

<sup>7</sup>John Graham, *Donoso Cortés: Utopian Romanticist and Political Realist* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1974), 139–40.

<sup>8</sup>Schmitt's self-identification with Donoso is obvious. See the pointed assessment: "Schmitt est ce nouveau Donoso Cortés!" Bernard Bourdin, "Carl Schmitt: Un contre-messianisme théologico-politique?," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 98, no. 2 (2014): 250–51.

style,<sup>9</sup> and Bonald, although he “writes badly,” still looms over modern anti-democratic thought.<sup>10</sup> The much lesser-known Donoso seems an unlikely figure in this grouping. The fact that intellectual history has not forgotten Juan Francisco de la Salud Donoso Cortés (1809–1853) is partly due to Schmitt. Donoso figures prominently within his work, even inspiring a short book of appraisal.<sup>11</sup> Schmitt found in the Spanish politician and political adviser a condensed and workable thesis about the secularization of theological concepts and a version of political decisionism. My focus in this article is the former.

I contend that Schmitt’s interpretation obstructs an understanding of Donoso’s theory of political worldviews, which revolves around a set of eternal questions. This theory is intricately connected with the notion of political theology originally developed by Donoso. Although Donoso does not speak of “political theology,” he invokes the argumentative pattern which Schmitt will popularize under that very name. The theme is introduced in the first chapter of the *Ensayo sobre el catolicismo, el liberalismo y el socialismo* (1851),<sup>12</sup> which sets out to address “how a great question of theology is always involved in every great political question.”<sup>13</sup> In portraying liberalism and socialism as historical and conceptual derivatives of theology, Donoso casts the state of European society as a struggle between different metaphysical schools. What once had been subsumed in theological reflection is now

<sup>9</sup>What Schmitt describes as Maistre’s firm grip on political reality is rendered by Cioran as a fever dream. E. M. Cioran, *Essai sur la pensée réactionnaire à propos de Joseph de Maistre* (Paris: Fata morgana, 1977).

<sup>10</sup>Alexandre Koyré, “Louis de Bonald,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 7, no. 1 (1946): 56.

<sup>11</sup>The fourth essay of the *Political Theology* especially relies on Donoso. Carl Schmitt, *Politische Romantik* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1919); “Zur Staatsphilosophie der Gegenrevolution (de Maistre, Bonald, Donoso Cortés),” *Archiv für Rechts- und Wirtschaftsphilosophie* 16, no. 1 (1922/23): 121–31; *Donoso Cortés in gesamteuropäischer Tradition* (Cologne: Greven, 1950).

<sup>12</sup>The book was published simultaneously in Spanish and in French. A major part of the political ideas it engages derives from France. Juan Donoso Cortés, *Ensayo sobre el catolicismo, el liberalismo y el socialismo considerados en sus principios fundamentales* (Madrid: Rivadeneyra, 1851); *Essai sur le catholicisme, le libéralisme et le socialisme* (Paris: Bibliothèque nouvelle, 1851).

<sup>13</sup>The history of the German editions is especially relevant owing to Schmitt being the single most relevant interpreter of Donoso. The first edition appeared 1854 in Tübingen; the 1933 edition is but an extract, presenting Donoso as a pseudo-Augustine. The 1989 edition is by Günther Maschke (1943–2022), a right-wing extremist and devout reader of Schmitt. Juan Donoso Cortés, *Versuch über den Katholizismus, den Liberalismus und Socialismus* (Tübingen: Laupp & Siebeck, 1854); Donoso Cortés, *Der Staat Gottes: Eine katholische Geschichtsphilosophie* (Karlsruhe: Badenia, 1933); *Essay über den Katholizismus, den Liberalismus und den Sozialismus* (Weinheim: VCH Verlagsgesellschaft, 1989). This article relies on the second English edition: Juan Donoso Cortés, *Essays on Catholicism, Liberalism, and Socialism: Considered in their Fundamental Principles*, trans. William McDonald (Dublin: Kelley, 1874).

increasingly bound up in competing political views. The *Ensayo* thus offers a prime example or the interpretation of modern *Weltanschauung* in terms of secularized theology. It foreshadows a framework of epochal speculation commonly connected with later social and political thought like Friedrich Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* (1887), Max Weber's *Protestant Ethics* (1904/1905), and Karl Löwith's *Meaning in History* (1949). Donoso is a precursor to such claims about the modern political reworking of theological content. Considerations of his political thought must take into account Schmitt's emblematic interpretation, while interpretations of Schmitt's political theology cannot justifiably forgo a closer examination of Donoso.

This article considers Donoso's influential and yet strangely neglected main work and its implicit idea of political theology, proceeding in five main arguments. (1) The existing, fragmented literature on Donoso and the Schmitt-Donoso connection lacks an appreciation of the *Ensayo*. It thus fails to grasp Donoso's philosophical importance, even if one were to limit this importance to his echo in Schmitt. (2) The *Ensayo* reveals how Donoso's insights into political theology are linked to a theory of competing modern worldviews and political epistemologies. Donoso describes a new schism of the modern age, where socialism emerges as a pseudotheology alongside Catholicism, with liberalism caught in an intermediary position. Commentators have focused on polemic and prophetic characteristics, neglecting Donoso's theory of worldviews. (3) Donoso's threefold topology of competing political theologies relates to an ontology of social life and further ties the explanation of social structures to a notion of evil in society: socialism locates evil in institutions, liberalism in the realm of the social, and Catholicism regards it primarily as a characteristic of man. (4) The immediate antecedent of these views appears in the work of socialist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–1865), who routinely interprets modern politics as secularized theology. Donoso engages Proudhon directly, but debates “the liberal school” without a similar emphasis on individual philosophers. A closer examination of the *Ensayo*—which considers the treatise's inspirational cues from French socialism and its single most important interpreter—suggests a Schmitt-Donoso-Proudhon rapport within the history of political thought. (5) This link ultimately suggests a reassessment of some ultraconservative implications of political theology in light of the theme of humanized religion, pointing further to the problem of figurative language. Finally, Donoso remains relevant as a sharp-tongued nineteenth-century Catholic reactionary whose echo reaches into our present through the continued existence of his linguistic imagery.

## 1. Donoso through the Mirror of the Literature

Schmitt invokes Donoso as a model for his own illiberalism, thereby downplaying his royalism and ultramonism, setting aside actual theological themes like providence and revelation as well as Donoso's biblical exegesis.

This problematic hermeneutic raises the question of what remains of a “political theology” once theological aspects are reduced to a series of inner-worldly claims. By explicitly focusing on parliamentary speeches, Schmitt appears to screen off Donoso’s theoretical main treatise, obliterating an important source of his theoretical leanings.<sup>14</sup> The image of Schmitt as political theologian is largely due to his self-fashioning in the 1922 *Political Theology* and the 1923 *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*. Schmitt draws on central arguments and, what is more, partly imitates the style and rhetoric of the *Ensayo*.

A particularity of the Schmitt-inspired reception of Donoso’s political theology is the fact that the *Ensayo* is often omitted in favor of smaller works. This is surprising, because not only does Donoso figure into the work of Schmitt, Löwith, Taubes, and their progenies, but his work has influenced readers such as the Count von Metternich, F. W. J. Schelling, Charles de Montalembert, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Alexander Herzen, Charles Baudelaire, Leopold von Ranke, and Pope Pius IX. The simplicity of his prose and sincerity of his mission were defended by the French conservative publicist Louis Veuillot<sup>15</sup> and the notable Italian theologian Luigi Taparelli d’Azeglio. The considerable standing he enjoyed during his lifetime is not necessarily matched in later interpretations. In Spain, Donoso was remembered by the conservative intellectual Menéndez Pelayo, who ranks him next to Jaime Balmes within a long tradition of Spanish heterodoxy.<sup>16</sup> In a search for intellectual depth, the Falangistas claimed “Donoso Cortes, Vazquez de Mella, and Menéndez Pelayo as the forerunners of Fascism.”<sup>17</sup> Yet this strand of the reception can be muted for the purpose of this article, considering the fact that current discourse about political theology mainly draws on an intellectual exponent not of Spanish, but of German Fascism.

Donoso is invoked by many readers of Schmitt, albeit often without consideration of his original works.<sup>18</sup> Even advanced interpretations such as John

<sup>14</sup>Works by Schmitt which further rely on Donoso are *Politische Romantik* (1919); *Römischer Katholizismus und politische Form* (1923); “Drei Möglichkeiten eines christlichen Geschichtsbildes,” in Hans Blumenberg, *Carl Schmitt: Briefwechsel 1971–1978*, ed. Alexander Schmitz and Marcel Lepper (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2007). Though Schmitt neglects the *Ensayo*, the book is part of his personal library (register listed by the Schmitt Gesellschaft, Feb. 2021).

<sup>15</sup>Louis Veuillot edited and introduced his works in France. *Œuvres de Donoso Cortés*, vols. 1–3 (Paris: Vatou, 1858–59). Montalembert’s affection is revealed by a lithograph of Donoso, on display in the bedroom study of his castle. John T. Graham, “Historical Research and Discovery in Private Libraries: Positivism in Comte, Donoso, and Ortega,” *Journal of the Rutgers University Libraries* 41, no. 1 (1979): 48.

<sup>16</sup>Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo, “De la filosofía heterodoxa desde 1834 á 1868,” in *Historia de los heterodoxos españoles*, vol. 3 (Madrid: Maroto é Hijos, 1881).

<sup>17</sup>Thomas J. Hamilton, “Spanish Dreams of Empire,” *Foreign Affairs* 22, no. 3 (1944): 462.

<sup>18</sup>Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, “Politische Theorie und politische Theologie: Bemerkungen zu ihrem gegenseitigen Verhältnis,” *Revue européenne des sciences*

McCormick's and Miguel Vatter's reiterate Schmitt's image of Donoso; Richard Wolin and Roberto Christi neglect Donoso's original thought and tend to read him exclusively through a twentieth-century lens.<sup>19</sup> Heinrich Meier's comprehensive interpretation of Schmitt does not connect views about the "metaphysical core of all politics" with the identical central assumption in the *Ensayo*.<sup>20</sup> Meier counts Schmitt's mentions of Donoso, rather than drawing on his work directly.<sup>21</sup> Rightly stressing Donoso's significance, Aaron Roberts still limits it to "the Spaniard's theological anthropology."<sup>22</sup> Alberto Spektorowski correctly observes that Donoso's Catholic idea of legitimacy would not allow for the unchecked decisionism developed by Schmitt.<sup>23</sup> Expert on reactionary thought Carolina Armenteros has developed a relevant midcentury contextualization of Donoso.<sup>24</sup> While authority figures as a crucial notion in Donoso, Mark Warden sees another source for his illiberalism in the distaste for economic questions and the view of the primacy of the political.<sup>25</sup> John Graham's comprehensive survey sees Donoso as the "leading conservative intellectual of the European reaction," but still neglects his political philosophy.<sup>26</sup> To the extent Graham thinks Donoso writes like a Saint-Simonian positivist, he forgets the prior Saint-Simonian appropriation of Catholic principles. Thomas Neill is right to point out that Donoso

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*sociales* 19, no. 54/55 (1981): 233–43; Reinhard Mehring, "Carl Schmitt, Spanien und Donoso Cortés," *Zeitschrift für Politik* 67, no. 1 (2020): 33–48.

<sup>19</sup>John P. McCormick, *Carl Schmitt's Critique of Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 52, 72, 192ff.; Miguel Vatter, *Divine Democracy: Political Theology after Carl Schmitt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 21–65; Vatter, "The Political Theology of Carl Schmitt," in *Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt*, ed. Jens Meierhenrich and Oliver Simons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Richard Wolin, "Carl Schmitt: The Conservative Revolutionary Habitus and the Aesthetics of Horror," *Political Theory* 20, no. 3 (1992): 435–41; Renato Christi, "Carl Schmitt on Liberalism, Democracy and Catholicism," *History of Political Thought* 14, no. 2 (1993): 281–300.

<sup>20</sup>Heinrich Meier, *Die Lehre Carl Schmitts* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1994), 118, 130, 150, 201.

<sup>21</sup>Heinrich Meier, *Carl Schmitt, Leo Strauss und der "Begriff des Politischen"* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1988), 36.

<sup>22</sup>Aaron B. Roberts, "Carl Schmitt—Political Theologian?," *Review of Politics* 77, no. 3 (2015): 470.

<sup>23</sup>Spektorowski thinks that for Donoso, "the question is not what is to be decided but who decides." However, the *Ensayo* ponders impersonal principles of a politics shaped by Christian dogmas. Alberto Spektorowski, "Maistre, Donoso Cortés, and the Legacy of Catholic Authoritarianism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63, no. 2 (2002): 283–302.

<sup>24</sup>Carolina Armenteros, "Le 1848 de Juan Donoso Cortés (1809–1853)," *Revue d'études proudhoniennes*, no. 5 (2019): 233–53.

<sup>25</sup>Mark D. Warden, "Donoso Cortés on Politics and Economics," *Il Politico* 34, no. 4 (1969): 739–56.

<sup>26</sup>Graham, *Donoso Cortés*, 1.

merges the role of a philosopher of history with that of an apocalyptic prophet but remains on the surface of his thought.<sup>27</sup> Unable to separate Donoso from Schmitt, few recent interpretations even describe Donoso as a protofascist.<sup>28</sup>

Menczer's collection of Catholic political thought overestimates Donoso when pairing him with the likes of Balzac, Schlegel, and Maistre.<sup>29</sup> One commentator labels Donoso a "classic" of Christian political thought, simply owing to his critique of liberalism in an 1852 letter to the editor of the influential journal *Revue des Deux Mondes*.<sup>30</sup> As a political adviser, Donoso relates to contemporary political phenomena such as the *regalismo* (the idea of supremacy of the monarch over the church), *Carlismo* (the traditionalist movement to install a branch of the Bourbon dynasty on the throne), *ultramontanismo* (the clerical emphasis on pontifical power), and *galicanismo* (popular civil power as similar to pontifical power).<sup>31</sup> He is part of a larger Catholic revival in Spain and blends into the rich tradition of nineteenth-century Catholic apologetics.<sup>32</sup>

However, Donoso's lay theology and his strong emphasis on social and political questions no doubt render him a particular figure in relation to theological discourse. This contrast becomes obvious when he is compared to the trained theologian Jaime Balmes (1810–1848). The strong convictions and nativist rhetoric of Balmes and Donoso feed into a "Black Legend" about

<sup>27</sup>Thomas P. Neill, "Juan Donoso Cortés: History and 'Prophecy,'" *Catholic Historical Review* 40, no. 4 (1955): 385–410; Herrera delineates an "apocalyptic prophetism," but mixes praise and self-identification with the subject of his book. Robert A. Herrera, *Donoso Cortes: Cassandra of the Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

<sup>28</sup>Enzo Traverso, "Confronting Defeat: Carl Schmitt between the Victors and the Vanquished," *History and Theory* 56, no. 3 (2017): 370–78. Milbank considers Donoso, who died in 1853, to be "at least semi-complicit with Nazism." John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), xiv, 68.

<sup>29</sup>Belà Menczer, *Catholic Political Thought, 1789–1848* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1962); Rafael E. Tarragó, "Two Catholic Conservatives: The Ideas of Joseph de Maistre and Juan Donoso Cortés," *Catholic Social Science Review*, no. 4 (1999): 167–77. Donoso is aptly labeled an heir to Bossuet's providential history: Edward Vlietinck, "La philosophie de l'histoire," *Revue néoscolastique de philosophie* 25, no. 97 (1923): 85–95.

<sup>30</sup>Frederick D. Wilhelmsen, "Donoso Cortés and the Meaning of Political Power," *Intercollegiate Review* 3, no. 3 (1967): 109–27; and *Christianity and Political Philosophy* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1978).

<sup>31</sup>Rosenblatt renders Donoso a "moderado," Aschmann explores Donoso's role as royal adviser; both disregard his philosophy. Nancy Rosenblatt, "A Study of Moderate Liberal Politics in 1845," *Catholic Historical Review* 62, no. 4 (1976): 589–603; Birgit Aschmann, "Charisma der Königin? Isabella II. und die Krise der spanischen Monarchie," in *Machthaber der Moderne*, ed. Jan-Henrik Witthaus and Patrick Eser (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2015), 147–79.

<sup>32</sup>Sylvio de Franceschi, "L'autorité pontificale face au legs de l'antiromanisme catholique et régaliste des Lumières," *Archivum Historiae Pontificiae*, no. 38 (2000): 119–63.

nineteenth-century Spain as an underdeveloped Catholic country.<sup>33</sup> A complementary myth romanticized these features in terms of a purity of belief and unmediated passions—also in light of the nineteenth-century German *Kulturkampf* between Protestants and Catholics.<sup>34</sup> This perspective on national cliché appears all the more relevant if we consider Schmitt's influential reading of "the Spaniard Donoso," who heroically confronts the challenges of modern politics with theological categories. The formulation "the Spaniard Donoso" is likely an indicator for interpretations arriving at Donoso through Schmitt.<sup>35</sup> It is employed still by respectable scholars such as Hans Joachim Schoeps, Herfried Münkler, and John Stroup.<sup>36</sup> Finally, Reinhart Koselleck appears to have borrowed a formula from Schmitt's 1944 essay on Donoso for the title of his postwar classic *Kritik und Krise*.<sup>37</sup> Political theory tends to reduce Donoso to a footnote within a continuously growing literature on Schmitt, rather than seeing him as a theorist in his own right, while historiography tends to reduce him to a figure in his time. In order to reconstruct Donoso's understanding of a politics transfused with theology, it is essential to outline his vision of the world as a conflict between contradicting systems of belief.

## 2. New Theologies and an Apocalyptic Prophecy

In both content and scope, the *Ensayo* compares with Edmund Burke's *Reflections* (1790) and Joseph de Maistre's *Considerations on France* (1797). Each combines a negative outlook on the future of Europe with a determination to preserve the prerevolutionary order. At the base of the *Ensayo* lies an

<sup>33</sup>Harold Eugene Davis, "Jaime Balmes, Spanish Traditionalist: His Influence in Spanish America," *The Americas* 35, no. 3 (1979): 342.

<sup>34</sup>Manfred Tietz, "Das theologisch-konfessionelle Interesse an Spanien im 19. Jahrhundert," in *Das Spanieninteresse im deutschen Sprachraum* (Madrid: Vervuert, 1989), 93–103.

<sup>35</sup>See the Nazi-era study by Dietmar Westemeyer, *Donoso Cortés: Staatsmann und Theologe: Eine Untersuchung seines Einsatzes der Theologie in der Politik* (Munster: Regensbergsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1940).

<sup>36</sup>Hans Joachim Schoeps, *Vorläufer Spenglers: Studien zum Geschichtspessimismus im 19. Jahrhundert* (Leiden: Brill, 1955), 83–88; Herfried Münkler, "Juan Donoso Cortes und der spanische Katholizismus," in *Handbuch der Politischen Ideen*, vol. 4, ed. Iring Fetscher and Herfried Münkler (Munich: Piper, 1986), 277–86; John Stroup, "Political Theology and Secularization Theory in Germany, 1918–1939: Emanuel Hirsch as a Phenomenon of His Time," *Harvard Theological Review* 80, no. 3 (1987): 321–68.

<sup>37</sup>"Schicksalshaftigkeit, die für die deutsche Geistesgeschichte der beiden letzten Jahrhunderte mit den Worten *Kritik und Krise* verbunden ist" (a fate which the German history of ideas of the recent two centuries has tied to the words *Critique and Crisis*) (Schmitt, *Donoso*, 100). Reinhart Koselleck, *Kritik und Krise: Eine Studie zur Pathogenese der bürgerlichen Welt* (Freiburg: Alber, 1969).



attempt to trace modern worldviews back to a series of common principles and shared assumptions. The treatise makes the case for traditionalist politics, defends the monarchy, and invokes an imminent apocalypse. Politics is said to rest on metaphysical foundations, meaning that liberalism, socialism, and Catholicism all meet on the grounds of theology. The Catholic school of thought represents theology proper, while socialism is “essentially theological” insofar as it addresses the same age-old questions.<sup>38</sup> The liberal school, “essentially antitheological,” attempts to evade these, but cannot withdraw itself completely from the “authority of theological science.”<sup>39</sup> Donoso’s vision of the future is a clash between three political metaphysics—one eternal (Catholicism) and two latter-day theologies (liberalism and socialism). Their confrontation takes the shape of an apocalyptic battle, with liberalism being the weakest combatant: “Its days are numbered; for on one side of the horizon appears God, and on the other, the people. No one will be able to say where it is on the tremendous day of battle, when the plain shall be covered with the Catholic and Socialistic phalanxes.”<sup>40</sup> Donoso’s assessment of “the” liberal school does not delineate a distinct body of theory.

Protestantism is considered a heresy, the starting point for later deviations, “consisting principally in teaching a doctrine different from that of the Church in the words the Church employs.”<sup>41</sup> Donoso refers to “the Protestant heresy” only in passing<sup>42</sup> but echoes here the prominent contemporary apologetic Jaime Balmes whose *El protestantismo comparado con el catolicismo en sus relaciones con la civilización europea* (1842–44) attempts to refute Protestantism for good.<sup>43</sup> Balmes reserves ample space for the condemnation of Enlightenment philosophy and Protestant theology. He attacks the historian-politician François Guizot, whereas the *Ensayo* identifies as its principal nemesis the socialist philosopher Pierre-Joseph Proudhon.<sup>44</sup>

Donoso identifies the principal flaw of modern social thought in its matter-of-fact view of empirical reality, devoid of hermeneutic depth. What reads like the rejection of empirical explanations in favor of metaphysical ones is at the same time a call to return to a specific kind of interpretation, one that concerns the essence of things instead of their mere appearance: “There is no spectacle more sad than that presented by a man of great talents, when he enters on the impossible and absurd enterprise of explaining visible things by the visible,

<sup>38</sup>Donoso, *Essays*, 211.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 267.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup>Jaime Balmes, *El Protestantismo comparado con el catolicismo en sus relaciones con la civilización europea* (Barcelona: Brusi, 1844).

<sup>44</sup>On socialist philosophers: “we have preferred considering them all in the writings of M. Proudhon, where they can be seen in their variety and in the aggregate” (Donoso, *Essays*, 194).

and natural things by the natural; which, as all things visible and natural, inasmuch as they are natural and visible, are one and the same thing, is quite as absurd as to explain a fact or a thing by itself."<sup>45</sup> He renders modern political ideologies through a condensed version of Christian dogma. Owing to its presentation of atheist views, its lay theology, and its condemnation of modern liberalism, some French clerics viewed the *Ensayo* as an attack on liberal Catholicism, and secretly branded the work heretical. Ultimately, the matter was brought to the Vatican and to the judgment of Pius IX.<sup>46</sup> The pope declared the work free from heresy and continued to hold Donoso in high esteem. Notably, the 1864 encyclical on social and political questions—the *Syllabus of Errors*—presents antiliberal views surprisingly similar to those of Donoso.<sup>47</sup> Crucial for his shift away from earlier liberal inclinations were the upheavals of 1848, which he read as a sign of universal decline. In an anonymous article, his contemporary Herzen drew a parallel between perceptions of decline in ancient and modern history, likening Donoso to the misguided Roman emperor Julian.<sup>48</sup> Donoso's best-known works remain the three speeches he delivered in the Spanish parliament after this shift away from liberal ideas, the "Discourse on Dictatorship" (January 1849), the "Discourse on the General Situation of Europe" (January 1850), and the "Discourse on the Situation of Spain" (December 1850). From the more detached viewpoint of the *Ensayo*, these powerful discourses represent mere inner-worldly maneuvers within a providential setting.

For a closer approximation of this setting, we need to consult the *Ensayo* rather than the abridged polemics of his speeches. In this veritable theology of history, "providence" becomes the name of the *movens* and affirms the link between God and man. Socialism presents a pure negation, "the negation of revelation, the negation of grace, and the negation of providence."<sup>49</sup> History reveals a tendency towards decline, based on a great number of heresies, or human errors. This view corresponds to the one maintained in the

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 84.

<sup>46</sup>The ultimate positive verdict came through an article in the important journal *La Civiltà Cattolica*. It was written by Taparelli d'Azeglio, who cultivated close ties with the pope and was instrumental for the development of modern Catholic social teaching. [D'Azeglio], *La Civiltà Cattolica* 2, no. 2 (1853): 171–89; see John J. Kennedy, "Donoso Cortés as Servant of the State," *Review of Politics* 14, no. 4 (1952): 520–55; Paola Ferranti and Luis de Llera, "La fortuna di Donoso Cortés in Italia," *Rivista di Filosofia Neo-Scolastica* 75, no. 4 (1983): 643–76.

<sup>47</sup>See Donoso's letter to Cardinal Fornari, with other materials, in "Donoso Cortés y la preparación del 'Syllabus,'" *Verbo* 1, no. 3 (1962): 29–57.

<sup>48</sup>The intended pun is that Herzen compares contemporary socialism to the rise of Christianity. Proudhon was the editor of the journal. [Herzen], "Donoso Cortés, marquis de Valdegarnas, et Julien, empereur romain," *La Voix du peuple* 2, no. 167 (March 18, 1850): 171–89.

<sup>49</sup>Donoso, *Essays*, 181.

papal *Syllabus of Errors*. However, Donoso is explicitly “reading” the ideological split and the theological split together: upon the Protestant heresy of the sixteenth century follow socialism and liberalism as nineteenth-century heresies. Both are essentially deviations from Catholic dogma and their main differences concern philosophical anthropology and whether the corruptibility of social institutions stands in relation to the corruptibility of the human soul.

Donoso’s account of universal history is dominated by the eternal validity of the Christian period, culminating in Catholic civilization and finally in universal decline. Each age is said to produce its own theologies; hence the concept of theology is not restricted to the Christian period alone. Consider his description of the Christianization of Rome: “What is the cause of these great changes and transformations? What is the cause of this great desolation and universal cataclysm? What has occurred? Nothing; only some new theologians are going about through the world announcing a new theology.”<sup>50</sup> The passage matches the advent of socialism many centuries later. This time, socialism’s theologians herald a new schism: “The common father of the school, Saint Simon, and the patriarch of the school, Fourier, are its august and glorious personifications.”<sup>51</sup> Another partisan of the school is Proudhon, also described as Antichrist: “Man or devil, whichever he be, it is certain that three centuries of damnation press on his shoulders with crushing weight.”<sup>52</sup> This polemic points to the paramount importance of figurative language in Donoso.

As indicated above, the *Ensayo* identifies three ultimate ways of understanding the world, each grounded in historical metaphysics and philosophical anthropology. Socialism and Catholicism are portrayed as resolute antagonists, with liberalism occupying the weaker middle ground. Catholicism represents an eternal truth, based on the concept of an almighty and supreme God. Hence the science of man cannot be separated from theology, “the ocean which contains and embraces all things.”<sup>53</sup> Every political order relates to a set of theological questions, thus corresponding to the fundamental problems of human existence. Catholicism builds on an image of human nature, therefore socialism and liberalism each conceive alternative versions of the latter. The character of Catholicism cannot possibly be inferred from its stance towards practical problems. It represents a unified whole and so one cannot erase certain dogmas and still hope to maintain a Christian order. The understanding of good and evil reflects an image of human nature, which connects to the dogma of original sin, the fall from grace, the weakness of the flesh, and the malleability of man: “The Catholic dogmas explain by their universality all universal facts, and these very facts, in their turn, explain the Catholic dogmas. In this way what is various is explained

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 24.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 199.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 279.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 9.

by what is one, and what is one by what is various, the contained by the container, and the container by the contained."<sup>54</sup>

This is contrasted with the particularism of the liberal school and its tendency to break up complex problems into smaller, compartmentalized issues. Liberalism then leaves these issues to the realm of discussion, whereby the order of the whole is misrepresented. Rationalism is found in socialism and liberalism alike, since each grants full autonomy to the idea of human reason. The socialist schools are rationalist in terms of philosophy, republican in terms of politics, and atheist in terms of religion.<sup>55</sup> Ultimately, the link between God and man is considered obsolete (the deist position: God created the world but is no longer responsible), or negated altogether (atheism). Donoso consistently displays a high regard for socialism in that he considers it more consistent and more logically coherent than liberalism. The latter is described as a system of contradictions, claiming to affirm God while separating Him from society.<sup>56</sup>

In Donoso's rendering of modern worldviews in light of Catholic dogma, each system continues to operate under a single given framework, rather than presupposing its own system of basic principles and truths. If this were otherwise, the *Ensayo* would take into account how the world is seen through the lens of socialism and liberalism respectively, given that these produce their own dogmatic principles. Part of Donoso's secularization thesis is a historical argument for Catholicism as the most durable and successful answer to a set of eternal human problems. If God transfuses society by virtue of his fundamental characteristics, theology as the science of God must transfuse all aspects of social and political life. Donoso identifies another basic element from which to understand the reigning theologico-political schools in the relation between conceptions of man and of evil.

### 3. Human Nature as Politico-Theological Problem

Considered in terms of Roman Catholic doctrine, the *Ensayo* appears close to the end of the three-century period between the nineteenth and the twentieth ecumenical councils, the Council of Trent (1545–1563) and the First Vatican Council (1869–1870). Donoso's insistence on an inherently flawed human nature conflicts with post-Tridentine dogma and with voices of liberal renewal within the church. Hence the somewhat odd disclaimer in the introduction to the Belgian edition: "M. Donoso Cortés a mal compris la doctrine catholique sur l'état de l'homme et avant et après la chute" (Mr. Donoso Cortés has misunderstood the Catholic doctrine on the state of man both before and after the Fall).<sup>57</sup>

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 240.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 180.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 181; and see esp. book 2, chaps. 5–10, and book 3, chap. 3.

<sup>57</sup>"Il semble croire la nature humaine tellement dégradée par le péché originel, qu'il ne reste plus rien de sain en elle ni dans l'ordre du vrai, ni dans l'ordre du bien" (He

For Donoso, the fundamental question about evil in society is whether it is considered accidental or essential to human activity. From the Catholic position, it cannot be accidental. For the rationalist schools, society resembles an organism with an existence separate from its individual members, hence the evil in society must be a social product.<sup>58</sup> Donoso holds that liberals understand evil as an inheritance of the past and therefore try to get rid of the evil incorporated in political institutions.<sup>59</sup> Socialists, on the other hand, locate evil exclusively in the realm of the social, advocating for a complete overhaul of society. For Donoso, the idea of society as organism, separated from the individual bodies of its constituent members, contradicts the dogma of the proliferation of sin. He has the Catholic school ask its opponents: Why do you want to change society and its institutions? To which the rationalist schools reply: Why do you want the moral reform of man? According to the latter, virtue is an obstacle and any system of punishment that hinders a free unfolding of the passions is obsolete. Proudhon personifies the ethos of the school, claiming the holiness of the passions. Liberals claim the good can be seized in the present, whereas the socialists expect a golden age in the future. Rather than fallen from paradise, man is thought to be ascending towards it. Liberalism hides its worldview, whereas socialism establishes firm positions about good and evil, God and man. Not only do the socialist and the liberal schools invert originally Catholic ideas, but according to Donoso, they actively obscure their theological origins.

Donoso frames Catholic dogmas in the language of modern social theory. Thus, according to the Catholic school, society presents itself as a mere aggregation of people, all subject to the same laws and institutions. Society cannot exist independently of its members and there is nothing in society that does not exist in man before. The good in society is the good in man, just as the evil in society is a mere extension of the evil in man. Heirs of a depraved nature, we depend upon grace and redemption. Only the first man is born privileged: his flesh subject to his will, his will subject to his reason, his reason receiving the divine light. Then came the sin which proliferated and persisted throughout the generations. Donoso's social poetics transports a wider theme about decadence and moral decay.

The poor are loaded with fatigue, the rich with indigestion, the powerful with pride, the lazy with weariness, the lowly with envy, and the mighty with disdain. The conquerors who drive the nations, are themselves

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seems to believe that human nature has been so degraded by original sin that there is nothing healthy left in it, either in the order of truth or in the order of good). "Note de l'éditeur belge," *Essai sur le catholicisme, le libéralisme et le socialisme* (Liège: Lardinois, 1851), vi.

<sup>58</sup>Donoso likely references the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and its rendering of a *corps social*.

<sup>59</sup>Donoso, *Essays*, book 2, chap. 10.

driven by furies, and only stumble on others because they are flying from themselves. Lust consumes the flesh of the youth with its impure flames; ambition takes the youth, made man, from the hands of lust, and burns him in other flames, and drives him into other conflagrations; avarice seizes him when lust rejects and ambition abandons him; she gives him an artificial life called sleepless; old misers only live because they do not sleep—their life is nothing but the absence of sleep.<sup>60</sup>

Laden with cultural pessimism and the motif of *vanitas*, this prose suggests the evanescence of all things existing. The *Ensayo* describes a society devoid of principles of measure and moderation, and under the provisional cover of civilization it sees only human baseness.<sup>61</sup> Pain and suffering are rendered functions within the larger social mechanism—Donoso's cynical answer to calls for universal equality. In his reactionary redefinition of brotherliness, the pleasures separate men while the pains unite them: Donoso's acceptance of human toils tends to naturalize social inequality. However, unlike later nineteenth-century evolutionary theorists such as Herbert Spencer, he does not ground social difference in a notion of universal progress. For Donoso, the possibility of social evolution is nil since there is no evolution of the human soul. Insofar as every social fact becomes intelligible only through a conceptual apparatus supplied by different theologies, Donoso can be called an ideologue.<sup>62</sup>

Human liberty is imperfect and requires authority and restraint, for human liberty in combination with the faculty of choosing can produce only bad outcomes.<sup>63</sup> Practically speaking, modern evil results from the socialist negation of Catholic doctrine plus the liberal negligence of religious matters. Donoso's enmity for the liberal school is further advanced in his "Discourse on the Situation of Spain," written in the same year as the *Ensayo*.<sup>64</sup> The speech criticizes the government's fixation on economic questions, which grants highest authority to the satisfaction of the passions. Once the focus of politics shifts to economic matters, the common good gets reduced to private well-being and the enjoyment of wealth, thereby undermining society's spiritual foundations.

The theme of the taming of the passions is central to the *Ensayo*, which puts an extraordinary emphasis on creatureliness and sin. Insofar as the emancipation of pleasures is seen as the direct catalyst for universal disorder, virtue ethics becomes the center of political philosophy. Pleasure becomes a political category, to be limited and channeled by virtue.<sup>65</sup> Donoso neglects the liberal idea of aggregated self-interests as a mechanism to keep the passions in check,

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 232–33.

<sup>61</sup>Schmitt, *Donoso*, 27–30; Schoeps, *Vorläufer Spenglers*, 87.

<sup>62</sup>Roberts, "Carl Schmitt—Political Theologian?," 470.

<sup>63</sup>Donoso, *Essays*, 125.

<sup>64</sup>Juan Donoso Cortés, *On Order: Two Addresses Newly Translated into English*, ed. and trans. Simona Draghici (Washington, DC: Plutarch, 1989).

<sup>65</sup>Warden, "Donoso Cortés on Politics and Economics," 740.

the thesis of the invisible hand, and a fortiori any understanding of providence in economic terms.<sup>66</sup> The uncontrolled emancipation of human passions is seen as the inevitable consequence of increased economic activity. Any philosophy grounded on the simple antagonism of pleasure and pain amounts to a mere affirmation of the appetites of the flesh. Donoso worries about the corruption of human virtue through liberal ideas, which for him represent an extension of the ethics of the marketplace. Solidarity and equality are mere products of reason, whereas the study of history teaches us about the weakness of human nature and the fallacies of human reasoning.<sup>67</sup> As the pleasures are seen as corrosive, certain effects of pain and pushback should be appreciated. "In pain there is a something fortifying, manly, and profound, which is the origin of all heroism and of all greatness; no one has felt its mysterious contact without improving: the child acquires by pain the vitality of youth, youth the maturity and gravity of men, men the bravery of heroes, heroes the sanctity of saints."<sup>68</sup>

Regarding the thesis of the secularization of concepts and ideas, Schmitt's *Political Theology* reiterates respective views of the *Ensayo*. Similarly, book 7 of Schmitt's *Concept of the Political* samples a theme from Donoso's reflections about evil and the nature of man: "One could test all theories of state and political ideas according to their anthropology and thereby classify these as to whether they consciously or unconsciously presuppose man to be by nature evil or by nature good. . . . The antagonism between the so-called authoritarian and anarchist theories can be traced to these formulas. A part of the theories and postulates which presuppose man to be good is liberal."<sup>69</sup> A similar message could be extracted from the *Ensayo*, except that Donoso uses the designations "Catholic" and "socialist" instead of "authoritarian" and "anarchist." While Schmitt's thesis about the Christian origins of politics obfuscates the significance of the *Ensayo*, both rely on socialist inspirations.

#### 4. Donoso and Proudhon: Theology, Human or Divine?

Donoso emphasizes the Christian origins of modern social and political life and references Rousseau's *Social Contract* to stress the importance of religion in the state. Book 4, chapter 8 of the *Social Contract* contains a dense historical account of the relation between theology and politics. According to Rousseau, ancient times knew no distinction between both spheres; the laws of the state

<sup>66</sup>See Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Jacob Viner, *The Role of Providence in the Social Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

<sup>67</sup>Donoso, *Essays*, 264.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*, 236–37.

<sup>69</sup>Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), §8.

prescribed the rules of religion, and thus to conquer was to be a missionary: "Political war was also Theological: the departments of the Gods were, so to speak, fixed by the boundaries of Nations."<sup>70</sup> Roman paganism allowed for multiple Gods in different places, until Jesus separated "the theological from the political system," instituting the "new idea of a Kingdom of the other world."<sup>71</sup> To pagans, the Christian division seemed like "hypocritical submission," signaling a secret wish to be "masters, and . . . to usurp the authority which they pretended to respect as long as they were weak."<sup>72</sup> Donoso does not discuss this genealogy further. He similarly invokes Rousseau's *Emile* only to note Christianity's influence on governmental authority and on the brevity of interregnum periods.<sup>73</sup> This neglect of Enlightenment philosophy is interesting insofar as Donoso is generally regarded a proponent of the philosophical counter-Enlightenment.

Socialism presents a greater threat and so it comes as no surprise that the *Ensayo* mentions Proudhon around fifty times. Concerning the theological roots of modern politics, Donoso enters into a dialogue with a figure he wholeheartedly refutes.<sup>74</sup> "In his 'Confessions of a Revolutionist,' M. Proudhon has written these remarkable words—'It is wonderful how we ever stumble on theology in all our political questions.' There is nothing here to cause surprise, but the surprise of M. Proudhon."<sup>75</sup> In this passage, Proudhon attacks outdated modes of rule and domination and models his critique of society on the critique of religion. To be sure, references to the religious foundation of modern society are common around the middle of the nineteenth century.<sup>76</sup> In an unironic sense, the reference is central to proponents of early socialism, such as Henri de Saint-Simon (1760–1825), Auguste Comte (1798–1857), and Charles Fourier (1772–1837). While the late Saint-Simon even imagined a socialist renewal of the Catholic Church, the liberal Catholic Félicité de Lamennais (1782–1854) favored a modern social teaching in Christian dress.<sup>77</sup> Such bridges between socialist and

<sup>70</sup>Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 143.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., 144.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid.

<sup>73</sup>Donoso, *Essays*, 10–11, 30.

<sup>74</sup>If the dialogical character is still visible in the *Ensayo*, it is relatively muted in Schmitt. In contrast, Karl Löwith noted Donoso's fascination with Proudhon, relating it to the eschatological meaning of the socialist doctrine. Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), 65.

<sup>75</sup>Donoso, *Essays*, 9.

<sup>76</sup>See Warren Breckman, "The Transcendent Sovereign and the Political Theology of the Restoration," in *Marx, the Young Hegelians, and the Origins of Radical Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 63–89.

<sup>77</sup>Lamennais's effort to embrace modern liberalism provoked a condemnation through the 1832 encyclical *Mirari vos. On Liberalism and Religious Indifferentism* by



Catholic thought are muted by Donoso, for whom socialism represents pure sin and the “absolute negation.”<sup>78</sup> He likewise bypasses biblical material that could invite socialist interpretations.<sup>79</sup> The urgency with which Donoso refutes socialist teaching is matched by Proudhon’s lengthy mockery of religious treatises, famously in his *Confessions of a Revolutionary*.<sup>80</sup>

Proudhon’s energies are directed towards altering the conditions of the fourth estate. He claims Christian theology remained silent or rejected such pressing inner-worldly questions. Catholicism is either an allegory of society, or it is nothing; and in seeking the truth, one cannot be blinded by metaphor and allegory. The church provides a symbolic system of defunct references which now inspire skepticism and irony.<sup>81</sup> In this spirit, the *Philosophie de la misère* describes the science of the economy as reworked, latter-day theology. Far from thinking that one thing really is the other, the book renders the existing science of political economy as a collection of dogmatic, unjust principles, and in this regard close to Catholic doctrine.

Proudhon claims that the teachings of political economy have replaced earlier theological justifications of political rule. Hence the necessity to trace religious and economic issues back to their original human dimension: “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”<sup>82</sup> Proudhon’s 1839 *Celebration of Sunday* debates the role of religion in society by discussing a public holiday. A site from which to interpret the spirit of an age, the Sabbath saw Roman fests of cruelty (*la boucherie du cirque*), Greek theater

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Pope Gregory XVI. See Carolina Armenteros, *The French Idea of History: Maistre and His Heirs, 1794–1854* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 259.

<sup>78</sup>Donoso, *Essays*, 127, 152, 154. Liberalism is afraid of the “absolute negation” and will “embark in the ship whose fortune carries it to the Catholic port, or to the Socialistic reefs” (*ibid.*, 174).

<sup>79</sup>See, for example, Acts 4:32–35: “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. . . . God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need” (*Reference Passage Bible, N.T.*, 5th ed., ed. I. N. Johns [Lincoln, NE: Alpha, 1907]).

<sup>80</sup>Löwith and Schmitt both conceive of socialism as secularized Christian eschatology. See Schmitt, *Drei Möglichkeiten*, 163, and Donoso Cortés, 95; Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 65.

<sup>81</sup>Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *De l’utilité de la célébration du dimanche considérée sous les rapports de l’hygiène publique, de la morale, des relations de famille et de cité* (Besançon: Bintot, Tubert & Jacquot, 1839), 365. Deaf to such irony, Marx accused him of “wrapping” political economy in providential and allegorical sayings. Karl Marx, “Das Elend der Philosophie: Antwort auf Proudhons Philosophie des Elends” (1855), in *Marx Engels Werke* 4.2.4.

<sup>82</sup>“Le sabbat a été fait pour l’homme, et non l’homme pour le sabbat” (Proudhon, *De l’utilité*, 23).

and figured prominently in Moses's government of the Hebrews. Moses simply addressed an age in the language appropriate to its ears. Hence the institution of Sabbath conserved the social order, which in turn conserved the Sabbath. According to Proudhon, religion originally encompassed science as well as politics.<sup>83</sup> He argues that even comprehensive modern social reforms should preserve the Sabbath, the Christian Sunday, otherwise endangering the very principles on which society rests. This prepares the ground for the more exaggerated claim that God represents nothing but the collective ego of humanity.<sup>84</sup> Though Donoso repeatedly attacks Proudhon, it seems Proudhon did not engage.<sup>85</sup>

The model for Schmitt's usage of the term political theology is an essay by Mikhail Bakunin which praises Proudhon. Bakunin's diatribe against Giuseppe Mazzini and the religious roots of his nationalism, later published as "The Political Theology of Mazzini and the International," reads like a variation of the socialist theme about human religion.<sup>86</sup> Bakunin and Proudhon are chronological predecessors of Donoso's and Schmitt's claims about the theological origins of politics. To be sure, these are ideologically opposing poles, but a serious consideration of Proudhon and Bakunin calls into question the originality of Donoso—and of Schmitt after him.<sup>87</sup> Obvious traces of Proudhonian ideas in Donoso point to the socialist spin on the idea of political theology, particularly the view of religion as a symbol of human wants

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., 94.

<sup>84</sup>Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *Philosophie der Staatsökonomie oder Nothwendigkeit des Elends 1*, ed. Karl Grün (Darmstadt: Leske, 1847), iv–v.

<sup>85</sup>As his popularity grew, Proudhon had become used to attacks. He wrote to a friend: "I live in the fire like a salamander, and from day to day I keep expecting to be burned." Jonathan Beecher, *Writers and Revolution: Intellectuals and the French Revolution of 1848* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 259.

<sup>86</sup>In 1871, Mazzini founded the journal *La Roma del Popolo*, where he criticized the myth of the Paris Commune and the International. This led Bakunin to publish "Réponse d'un international à Mazzini," first translated into Italian in the *Gazzettino Rosa*, August 14, 1871; French in *La liberté* (Brussels), August 18–19, 1871; reprinted in December 1871 as *La théologie politique de Mazzini et l'Internationale*. The French term "théologie politique" translates into "politische Theologie" or "political theology."

<sup>87</sup>"Et dans le camp opposé, qu'y a-t-il? C'est la révolution, ce sont les négateurs audacieux de Dieu, de l'ordre et du principe d'autorité, mais par contre et pour cela même les croyants en l'humanité, les affirmateurs d'un ordre humain et de l'humaine liberté." (And in the opposite camp, what is there? It is the revolution, the audacious deniers of God, of order and of the principle of authority, but for this very reason also the believers in humanity, affirmers of a human order and of human freedom.) Mikhail Bakunin, "Réponse d'un international à Mazzini," in *Œuvres*, vol. 6 (Paris: Stock, 1913), 111; see Bakunin, *Dieu et l'État* (Paris: Pessaux, 1892), 3.

and needs.<sup>88</sup> Whereas the political theory of Donoso's traditionalism asserts the continued existence of religious categories, the socialism of Proudhon and Bakunin assumes the inner-worldly roots of religious doctrine.

Socialist philosophers have repeatedly revisited the theme about theological elements underpinning modern politics, culminating in the *German Ideology* (1845–46) by Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Moses Hess, and others. A lesser-known Left-Hegelian, Karl Grün (1817–1887), similarly drew on the tension between socialism and theology to frame early nineteenth-century socialism.<sup>89</sup> Grün heavily relied on Proudhonian ideas and offers another take on the Proudhon-Donoso rapport. According to Grün, France consciously developed a socialism in theological disguise, while German socialists had simply remained unaware of their theological cover. This judgment seems especially astute considering that Marx and Engels would succeed in labeling their French successors utopian and obsolete. The Francophile Grün displays a more conciliatory attitude, claiming that if one were to remove politics' dress, one would arrive at a purely "soziale Weltanschauung."<sup>90</sup> This view exists in opposition to the idea of political theology, insofar as the latter is understood as a claim about theological roots of politics. Through Grün, the admirer of Proudhon, we become aware of socialist philosophy's tendency to consciously understand itself by way of political theology. Proudhon serves as a stand-in for socialist thought in Donoso and thereby undermines him from within. At the same time, Donoso's reading of modern political ideas as variations of Christian thought reflects back on Proudhon's teaching.

Whereas Donoso, as we have seen, posits the unity of Catholicism, for Proudhon religious symbols amount to a failed insight into social forces. Religion was once the name for everything, but it necessarily derived its energies from elsewhere: "Because man cannot become one with himself, he kneels before God and prays. He prays, and his prayer, the hymn sung to God, is a heresy against society."<sup>91</sup> If Donoso reduces political worldviews to variations on a theological theme, Proudhon reduces theology to an image of social force. If Donoso's political theology aspires to a theological legitimation of politics, Grün and Proudhon similarly escalate matters, albeit in the name of a social holism devoid of theological elements. All

<sup>88</sup>See the expressive content surrounding the formula "die menschliche Bedürfnisnatur" (the human economy of needs) in Böckenförde, who still echoes the Donoso-Proudhon rapport in his influential essay "Die Entstehung des Staates als Vorgang der Säkularisation." The text gained notoriety as the source of the so-called Böckenförde theorem and points to the theological preconditions of modern state power. See Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, *Staat, Gesellschaft, Freiheit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1976), 54.

<sup>89</sup>Karl Grün, "Theologie und Sozialismus" (1846), in *Ausgewählte Schriften*, vol. 2 (Berlin: Akademie, 2005), 479–506.

<sup>90</sup>*Ibid.*, 480.

<sup>91</sup>Proudhon, *Philosophie der Staatsökonomie*, 334.

conceive of the political in a way that eschews mediation, suppressing what one might call a dialectics of secularization—insights into the entanglement, interrelation, and uniform movement of different philosophical beliefs.

When read in a summary fashion, the Donoso-Proudhon rapport resembles a blunt confrontation: one claims the theological roots of modern politics, while the other pronounces the human roots of theology. Proudhon's and Donoso's politics affirm the antagonism, and yet, on a discursive level, the two positions are more aligned than is visible at first. Even philosophical adversaries are principally united within a community of discourse insofar as they share a common vocabulary and entertain similar ideas.<sup>92</sup> This unifying perspective on a mid-nineteenth-century theme is not meant to smooth out any existing political demarcations but further explores the linguistic grounds on which philosophical differences are negotiated as ideological convictions, and vice versa.

### 5. Political Theology as Metaphor

There is an obvious case to be made for the relevance of figurative language in the discourse on political theology. Consider, for instance, Proudhon ridiculing the modern division of labor as part of a providential setting,<sup>93</sup> or Donoso comparing the modern family ("debased and profaned") to a fleeting visit at the club or the casino.<sup>94</sup> Understanding political theology within a framework of metaphor and figurative language pays homage to the associative freedom necessary to subsume widely varying phenomena under an overarching philosophy of history. In this spirit, Hans Blumenberg has argued that a theorem of secularization which assumes theological roots for modern concepts de facto delegitimizes their usage in a nontheological framework.<sup>95</sup> Donoso introduces a major part of the expressive content which his reader Schmitt would popularize under the label of political theology.

Donoso then represents a moment within a larger process by which a metaphor slowly detaches itself from the foundations that had enabled its creation. Overemphasizing the fall of man, he explicates how a Catholic idea of evil, framed as evil-in-man, translates into modern political ideology. He conceives socialism and liberalism as reworked theology, at the same time rendering Catholicism susceptible to modern *Weltanschauung* and translating Christian dogma into the language of modern social theory. This identification of theological questions within modern politics—a thesis about the

<sup>92</sup>Robert Wuthnow, *Communities of Discourse: Ideology and Social Structure in the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and European Socialism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

<sup>93</sup>Proudhon, *Philosophie der Staatsökonomie*, 118.

<sup>94</sup>"Duration is here, as in many other things, the measure of perfection" (*Essays*, 34).

<sup>95</sup>See also Daniel Weidner, "The Rhetoric of Secularization," *New German Critique*, no. 121 (2014): 1–31.

secularization of concepts—might simply represent a reaction to the social religions invented in a climate of exaggerated rationalism in postrevolutionary France.<sup>96</sup> In many instances, the *Ensayo* engages Proudhon, who turns the secularization theorem and the concept of political theology on its head. A brief consideration of the theme of humanized theology, notably in Proudhon's *Celebration of Sunday*, served as reminder about the opposite pole of the formula "political theology." Where Bonald and Maistre render Enlightenment social thought as a reaction to the Catholic image of society, Donoso similarly portrays socialism and liberalism as negations.

A footnote to the Donoso reception can be found in the file the SS High Command compiled on Schmitt, which contains a report addressed to Hermann Göring. This document turns the theorem of secularization into a case against Schmitt: claiming he saw "jurisprudence as secularized theology," the report cites Schmitt's rhetoric of secularization and his appraisal of Donoso as evidence of his disloyalty to the fascist regime.<sup>97</sup> The Nazi state had many ways to discredit disagreeable academics, but the fact that its apparatus would employ the formula of "secularized theology" against Schmitt may itself be testament to the status of "political theology" as metaphor and figurative language. After all, a political metaphor is not attached to fixed theoretical content, but available to a host of different political actors.

Donoso's inner-worldly interpretation of a series of Catholic dogmas partly misrepresents the doctrine it aims to defend and is further simplified and reduced through the interpretation of Schmitt.<sup>98</sup> The latter preserved Donoso's political theology by abandoning his royalist principles and the remnants of his biblical interpretation. The fact that Schmitt was ultimately

<sup>96</sup>See also Robert Spaemann, *Der Ursprung der Soziologie aus dem Geist der Restauration: Studien über L. G. A. de Bonald* (Munich: Koesel, 1959); Felix Steilen, *Soziologie und Geschichtsphilosophie* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2021), 151–200.

<sup>97</sup>"The true core of this system of belief was that all order was thought to be purely formal and that it said nothing about the content and the end; jurisprudence is thereby removed from its actual social task [*Aufgabe im Volk*], in this system it becomes secularized theology [*säkularisierte Theologie*]." Document included in a dossier produced by the *Sicherheitsdienst der Reichsführung SS* in 1936–1937 as result of an investigation into Carl Schmitt, held at the Wiener Library, Tel Aviv, Collection Ref. 505/1: esp. "Der Staatsrechtslehrer Prof. Dr. Carl Schmitt," Commissioner of the Führer for the observation of the entire intellectual and ideological education of the National Socialist German Worker's Party ("Mitteilungen zur weltanschaulichen Lage. Vertraulich"); addressed to Hermann Göring and Paul Körner (no signature), 12/15/1936.

<sup>98</sup>On the "ostentatious display of his Catholicism," see Vittorio Hösle, *A Short History of German Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 237; on the blatant anti-Semitism, see Raphael Gross, *Carl Schmitt und die Juden* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2000).

considered a nuisance by the Nazi apparatus and stripped of his functions enabled his later elevation into canonized political theory. An eclectic historicism, blown out of proportion, has thus become a fixture in modern political theory. To use a slightly reductive example, it is as if Albert Speer remained a model in the theory of architecture today: after all, the overpowering effect and the mood of bravado the latter distilled from Roman architecture seem to find a clear analogy in the principles Schmitt derived from the ideas of Catholic traditionalism—partly owing to his ability to extract from Donoso Cortés an effective metaphor of political theology.

### Conclusion

Reading Donoso's 1851 *Ensayo sobre el catolicismo, el liberalismo y el socialismo* in terms of its implicit idea of political theology involves a complex back and forth between historical times. The book makes sweeping claims about the defining principles of historical epochs and is at the same time subsumed by later interpretations. In political theory, Donoso is remembered today as a protagonist within Schmitt's story about the transformation of theological concepts. Historiography, on the other hand, often reduces Donoso to a figure in his time. These views largely neglect his idiosyncratic and highly original political thought. A reconstruction of the main thrust of the *Ensayo* displays Donoso's vision of modern politics as a sphere of conflicting political ideologies, essentially rendered secularizations of Christian dogma.

Donoso provides important independent contributions to our understanding of political theology in a systematic, historical, and discourse-theoretical perspective. The systematic content includes a speculation about the common roots of our understanding of political ideas, which he relates to theological assumptions about human nature, social wholes, and causes of evil (or its structural equivalents). This view channels theological discourse into a set of dogmas, in turn matched by socialist and liberal equations. Here Catholicism assumes an idea of human nature as the base of all social and political theory. There is no good in society which is not before in man; likewise, the evil in society is an extension of the evil in man. Liberals claim the good can be seized in the present; socialists expect a golden age in the future and Catholic politics favors images of eternity and tradition. Liberalism reduces politico-theological questions to mere private well-being or the enjoyment of wealth; its politics shifts the focus from spiritual to economic matters. Donoso's occupation with the socialist trope of humanized religion adds a decisive antagonist meaning to the notion political theology. Socialism, personified in Proudhon, is said to represent an absolute negation and to basically invert Catholic doctrine but still serves a complementary function in this wider argument. Regarding the historical semantics and the larger discourse on political theology, Donoso's secular Christian thought

forms part of a larger continuum in the history of thought, where he stands on a par with traditionalist conservatives like Burke and Maistre. While the present article focuses on his idea of secularized theology, further explorations might eventually secure him a more prominent place in the intellectual history of the nineteenth century, conceived as a history of mutually exclusive, violently negating and yet jointly communicating ideologies.