Preface

From the vantage point of the present, long swathes of the twentieth century today resemble a wasteland, in which grandiose political, scientific and architectural visions lie scattered about like toppled gravestones. Time and again, what began with a starry-eyed faith in humanity's boundless abilities was followed by withdrawal into a self-created world of horror. The twentieth century is often described as the godless century. But it might be closer to the mark to think of it as the century in which humanity itself took the place of God. Where history was previously thought of as lying within the shielding embrace of God, twentieth-century humanity took history into its own hands and established its own furthest goals for history. The century's grand utopian social projects stand as reckless and devastating attempts to realize those goals.

Such at least is how these projects were regarded in the aftermath of the Second World War. During these years Europe's intellectuals exerted themselves to put into perspective the atrocities of the past decades. Such analyses not infrequently had a political subtext. Doubtless the best known to posterity of these is the succession of liberal thinkers, from Karl Popper and Isaiah Berlin to the Swedish political scientist Herbert Tingsten, who sought to trace the origins of totalitarian ideology back to the grandiose philosophies of history of the nineteenth century. But liberals were not alone in shouldering this task. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, perhaps the most famous response from the Marxist quarter, appeared as early as 1944, and a decade later Georg Lukács delivered a comprehensive indictment of the entire 'irrational' legacy of German thought, 'from Schelling to Hitler'.[1] Conservatives, too, offered analyses, of which the most famous is associated with the German political thinker Eric Voegelin.

Within a historico-philosophical context, the classic work is Karl Löwith's *Meaning in History* from 1949. In just over three hundred pages Löwith sketches the genealogy of a historical perspective that paved the way for the utopian

ideologies of modernity. By revealing the mythological conceptions behind the notion of progress, he seeks to persuade us moderns to abandon the dream of creating a heaven on earth. With a view to further establishing the folly inherent in the idea of historical progression, Löwith chooses to present history in reverse. Taking his cue from Jacob Burckhardt, he presents a lineage running through Marx, Hegel, Proudhon, Comte, Condorcet, Voltaire, Vico, Bossuet, Joachim of Fiore, Augustine and Orosius, ending with the Bible. For Löwith, it is not enough to try to locate the roots of modern utopias in the Enlightenment and Romanticism. Rather, the problem lies in the biblical legacy as such. For it was there that humanity for the first time began to conceive of history as *divine*, as an eschatological drama of damnation and redemption governed by divine providence. This conception persisted and was refined during the entire medieval period, reaching its culmination in the millenarian dreams of Joachim of Fiore. With the eventual fading of the biblical worldview, humanity turned its faith in a suprahistorical object towards history itself. Thus was born the modern utopia of a definitively just society, an idea that generated successive totalitarian projects in which the ends justified the means.

The anti-utopian tradition which Löwith sets out has been further developed by a series of studies ranging from Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1957) to John Gray's bestselling *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (2007). Their shared thesis is that the supposedly secular ideologies which underpin Western modernity ultimately derive their inspiration from a Jewish and Christian messianic tradition. For his part, Gray laconically observes that 'modern revolutionary movements are a continuation of religion by other means'.[2]

The question is whether this is exclusively evil – that is to say, whether the history of Western theology is only ever a burden upon modern political thought. In the following study I propose to develop this line of enquiry. In parallel with the comprehensive critique of utopia that spread in the wake of the Second World War, a series of thinkers, primarily of Jewish heritage, have emerged to defend the prophetic tradition. Their number includes Ernst Bloch, Martin Buber, Abraham Heschel, Yehezkel Kaufmann, Gershom Scholem and Jacob Taubes, to name but a few. These thinkers differ from each other in several key respects. What they share, however, is a rejection of the idea that the biblical legacy has been discredited by the violent ideologies of modernity. While such a connection can undeniably be made, the same tradition contains quite different potentialities. It was the ancient Jewish prophets who first advanced the idea of a God for all of humanity. In their dream of all people returning to the God of Israel, these prophets extended what had initially been a national idea into a universal vision. History is where this vision will be realized, and it is humanity's vocation to realize in its everyday life the higher justice that is the ultimate goal of history. In this way, thinkers such as Bloch and Taubes, in sharp contrast to those who reflexively reject the biblical legacy, are able to argue

that the prophetic promise of impending redemption has throughout history inspired people to revolt against unjust and oppressive orders.

The present analysis will situate itself theoretically between these two poles of twentieth-century debate over the theological underpinnings of history. Although I do not deny that this book has been inspired in part by Löwith's classic study, my intention is to show that the theology of history to which the biblical legacy gave rise is nowhere as one-dimensional as postwar anti-utopian writers often imply. In this respect I have been considerably inspired by those many writers who have identified the enduring theological, philosophical and political value of the biblical legacy.

Any critical discussion of the biblical legacy must concede that it, like all the great traditions of thought, contains numerous tensions and contradictions. In this case, the most fundamental tension stems from the fact that two different traditions – Jewish and Christian – lay claim to the same narratives. And yet throughout history the relationship between these two traditions has been anything but symmetrical, something that is reflected *inter alia* in the theological claims made by each party with regard to history. Christian theology of history, which has to a considerable degree defined Western views of history, can essentially be said to have arisen as part of the early church's efforts to differentiate itself from the majority of Jews, who did not acknowledge Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah. From an early stage, Christian commentators developed an account of history in which Christians were presented as having assumed the role of God's chosen people. This line of reasoning rested upon a dialectic that associated Judaism with the past, closure and materiality, while Christianity for its part was identified with the future, openness and spirituality. With the dawning of the new era, Christian theologies of history were transformed into more or less secularized philosophies of history, which sublimated several of the inherited anti-Jewish tropes and carried them forward into a modern, secular Europe.

This problematic, something Jacques Derrida has characterized as a 'duel between Christian and Jew', forms a recurrent theme in my argument. In this respect this study has an entirely different starting point from the aforementioned critiques of utopianism, which almost exclusively consider the 'Judaeo-Christian' tradition as a unitary whole. What follows will not only map out the complex interrelationship of these two strands of the Western historico-theological tradition but also break with the stereotyping tendency to connect Judaism with the particular and Christianity with the universal. On the contrary, I assert that both these traditions are complex and include deeply heterogeneous elements, with the result that the line of demarcation rarely runs between the two traditions, more commonly being found, rather, within each of them. That such is the case will become readily apparent when, for example, the messianic motif in each tradition is addressed in order to highlight the resulting differences in their respective relations to history.

The argument presented here also differs methodologically from several of the classic accounts of the Western historico-theological legacy. The occasional tendency towards one-sidedness exhibited by such studies can largely be traced to their scope and the nature of their claims. Löwith's *Meaning in History* offers an illustrative example. The study outlines an intellectual trajectory reaching from antiquity to the last century, a chronological span that comes, not unexpectedly, at the price of analytical depth in its treatment of those thinkers represented in Löwith's argument. Furthermore, if Löwith's attempt to offer a panoramic overview of the Western notion of history were to be repeated, it would today be necessary to cover the complex historico-philosophical debates of the twentieth century (in which Löwith himself represents a central figure). Given this background, it is self-evidently neither desirable nor feasible to seek to achieve the kind of comprehensive chronicle that Löwith sets out for himself.

In an attempt to unite breadth with depth, I have chosen in the present study to combine a chronological disposition with a thematic one. Their connecting thread comprises three central historico-theological motifs, namely, *prophetism*, *messianism* and *the development of the spirit* (the latter will additionally be examined in terms of a *pneumatic* motif). The intention is thus not to make an exhaustive description of the historical development of these intellectual motifs. Instead, the following five chapters offer a series of strategic case studies from different periods, showing how a close reading of selected texts can enable identification of a revealing continuity of motifs across time.

A methodological approach of this kind nonetheless raises the question of selectivity. Given the virtual inexhaustibility of the Western intellectual tradition, why focus on these five case studies in particular? The rationale behind this selectivity is an already established history of theological and philosophical influence (*Wirkungsgeschichte*), which involves a number of interconnected thinkers and works. My aim, however, is not only to inscribe myself in this history of influence, but simultaneously to problematize it. Although this account follows a chronological axis, it resembles Löwith's structure insofar as it traces a history of influence that is extrapolated from later historical developments. It is, in other words, a genealogy of the contemporary politico-philosophical debate that leads back to particular interventions in late-twentieth-century debates, which in turn points backwards to a line running from German Romanticism, via medieval Christianity, to the Bible. A brief summary of the structure of the book will clarify this perspective.

Chapter One, 'The God of History', re-examines the ways in which the prophetic, messianic and pneumatic motifs were originally constituted in antiquity. The textual focus here is the prophetic literature in the Hebrew Bible – that is, the Old Testament of the Christian Bible. Engaging critically with these texts necessitates something of a detour through exegetical scholarship, for which reason the discussion is grounded as far as possible on current perspectives on the prophetic literature. Since my intention is to highlight the

politico-philosophical potential of these texts that subsequent thinkers have drawn upon, I also take my lead from Martin Buber, Abraham Heschel and Yehezkel Kaufmann. In the middle of the last century these Jewish writers, as mentioned above, published a series of famous works that treated the ethical and political value of the prophetic literature. Drawing on the argument of these thinkers, the central thesis of this chapter is that biblical historico-theological motifs in a number of respects laid the basis for the understanding of history that would become dominant in the Western civilization.

Chapter Two, 'The Ages of History', describes how the prophetic tradition was taken up by the medieval theologian Joachim of Fiore. Joachim and the ancient prophets are separated not only by more than a thousand years but also by the birth and expansion of Christianity. The opening sub-section presents a concise overview of how Christian theology of history emerged partly as a way to control Christianity's relationship to the Judaic tradition from which it gradually distanced itself, and partly as an attempt to account for the deferral of the Second Coming. In the writings of Joachim, who was active in the twelfth century, Christian theology of history is given a new direction. In contrast to the definitions of history given by previous Christian commentators, in which the passage of time is considered primarily as an interim period of waiting for the eschatological fulfilment of history, Joachim turns his attention towards an impending, intrahistorical period of peace and reconciliation. This vision, which Joachim refers to as an 'age of the spirit', forms the basis *inter alia* for the charges levelled at him by anti-utopian critics in the twentieth century, of having established the intellectual premise for modern utopianism. A key goal of this part of the study is to problematize such simplifying accounts through reference of Joachim's own writings as well as the pioneering research into this author that has been carried out in the last fifty years.

Chapter Three, 'Romantic History', illustrates how central strands of Christian theology of history were secularized during the Romantic period, mutating into politically charged philosophies of history. Specifically, it highlights the way in which Joachim's conception of an age of the spirit finds an echo in the idea of a new, higher religion – a 'religion of the spirit' – that is articulated in broadly similar terms by Novalis, Friedrich Schleiermacher and F.W.J. Schelling. Now, it is axiomatic that Romanticism's visionary elements are made problematic by subsequent intellectual developments in Germany. Yet the prevailing critique of Romanticism tends to obscure the considerable dislocations between early and late Romanticism. Challenging this simplified paradigm, the key insight into the non-attainability of the Ideal that distinguishes early Romantic thought, as well as Schelling's later writings, is addressed. Against this background, the claim is made that early Romantic philosophy of history ought rather to be understood as suffused with *anti-utopian* elements.

The critique of Romanticism lives on nonetheless. As already noted, in the wake of the totalitarian projects of the 1930s and 1940s thinkers from both the

Right and the Left sought to identify the roots of the evils that had beset the West; not infrequently, they found the culprit in Romanticism. Chapter Four, 'History after God', builds on twentieth-century ideology critique to show how talk of 'the end of ideologies' not infrequently gives way to an illusory conviction as to the writer's own freedom from ideology. After a brief discussion of these mid-century debates, attention turns to the famous symposium on Capri in 1994 whose participants included Jacques Derrida, Gianni Vattimo, Eugenio Trías and Hans-Georg Gadamer. At this point the discussion returns to the topic of early Romanticism, including its concept of a religion of the spirit, with which several of the symposium's participants sought to restore a visionary impulse to philosophical thinking but without resorting to the grandiose utopias of the preceding one hundred years. In this effort to engage in a post-critical fashion with Western theology and philosophy of history, these philosophers made an interesting return to religion also in the wider sense of the term: above all to the critical potentialities that inhere in the prophetic strands of both Jewish and Christian traditions.

The final chapter, 'The Politics of History', draws together the various strands of the discussion in order to concentrate on the current politico-philosophical conversation. My principal interlocutors here are Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, all central figures in the debate that has been revived in the twenty-first century over the political radicalism of the biblical legacy. At first sight, this intervention in an ongoing critical discussion might seem to run counter to the narrative thread of the intellectual trajectory traced out in previous chapters. Despite their substantial disagreements, Agamben, Badiou and Žižek in many respects herald a break with the deconstructive and hermeneutic philosophy associated with figures such as Derrida and Vattimo. On closer scrutiny, however, the nature of this relationship reveals itself as markedly more complex. Above all in their treatment of the historico-theological motifs examined in this study, these thinkers exhibit an important thematic continuity, albeit with important differences when it comes to the exact application of these motifs. To be more precise, the prophetic, messianic and pneumatic motifs recur in the philosophies of Agamben, Badiou and Žižek, but often for very different purposes than those found in the philosophies of Derrida and Vattimo. This critical contrast compellingly highlights the way in which tensions within the Western historico-theological tradition continue to inform politico-philosophical debate in the present moment.

The underlying premise throughout these chapters is a recognition of the complex and double-edged nature of the biblical legacy. Recognizing this complexity, however, is not tantamount to saying that any interpretation of its essential tropes and motifs is as reasonable or desirable as any other. What this study offers, therefore, is not simply a close reading of selected texts from five different historical periods. Rather, through my reading of these particular texts I develop an argument for a specific interpretation, a certain way of framing

what I consider to be the enduring politico-philosophical value of the biblical legacy. Thus, for reasons that will become clear throughout the study, I argue for a 'theopolitical' interpretation of the prophetic motif, invoking of a form of justice that does not allow itself to be reduced to any existing political order, in contrast to what in the modern era has come to be known as 'political theology' – the tendency to use theological claims to support a specific political agenda. Similarly, I argue for the inclusion of the messianic motif in its 'restorative' interpretation rather than its 'apocalyptic' one, the former putting the emphasis on justice as an ongoing task whereas the latter tends to focus on justice as a sudden irruption of a new order. Finally, regarding the pneumatic motif, I argue for a 'spectral' reading of the concept of spirit – taking its inspiration from Derrida's 'hauntology' – in contrast to the often coercive dialectic schemas that have characterized idealist philosophies of history throughout European modernity.

This line of reasoning also has consequences for my critical assessment of the contemporary debate. While figures such as Agamben, Badiou and Žižek offer highly interesting analyses of the biblical legacy as a potential resource for political reflection, I am less convinced by the conclusions they draw from these analyses. Above all, I raise serious concerns about the way in which decisionist elements in a neo-Schmittian fashion are being combined with a select number of theological concepts – 'grace' rather than 'law', 'spirit rather than 'letter', etc. – in order to break what is conceived as the political deadlock of our liberal societies. This revitalization of the apocalyptic (or, in the case of Agamben, antinomian) strand of the biblical legacy not only tends to place politics above dialogue and negotiation; it also invites the potentially authoritarian quality that Löwith identified as the tragic culmination of the Western historico-philosophical tradition: a quasi-theologically legitimated worship of the present and the moment, which in its most extreme form regards the actual course of history as self-justifying.

Is the biblical legacy, then, only ever a burden upon modern political thought? Despite Löwith's incisive critique, I contend that it is not, although it remains a matter of debate as to what the enduring politico-philosophical value of this legacy is. While in this study I conclude that its single most important insight consists in the idea of justice as a never-completed mission, I would prefer this to be seen less as a conclusion than as an invitation to the continuous task of exploring, restoring and redefining the delicate notion of justice.

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Notes

1. It should be clarified here that Lukács's *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft: Der Weg des Irrationalismus von Schelling zu Hitler* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1955), to which I am alluding, has an ideological slant that differs markedly from both *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Lukács's own earlier works. I return to Lukács in more detail in Chapter Four.

2. J. Gray. 2008. *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia*, London: Penguin Books, 3.

3. All italics in quoted matter are in the original source, unless otherwise stated by the author.